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# AGATHA'S HUSBAND

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF  
"OLIVE," "THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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In memorial of the friendship of a lifetime.

James May 13th, 21 Thorp. 30.



# AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

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## CHAPTER I.

AGATHA.

—If there ever was a woman thoroughly like her name, it was Agatha Bowen. She was good, in the first place—right good at heart, though with a slight external roughness (like the sound of the *g* in her name), which took away all sentimentalism. Then the vowels—the three broad rich *a*'s—which no one can pronounce with *nimini-pimini* closed lips—how thoroughly they answered to her character!—a character in the which

was nothing small, mean, cramped, or crooked.

But if we go on unfolding her in this way, there will not be the slightest use in writing her history, or that of one in whom her life is beautifully involved and enclosed—as every married woman's should be—"Agatha's Husband."

He was still in cloudy mystery—an individual yet to be; and two other individuals had been "talking him over," feminine-fashion, in Miss Agatha Bowen's drawing-room, much to that lady's amusement and edification. For, being moderately rich, she had her own suite of rooms in the house where she boarded; and having no mother—ah, sorrowful lot for a girl of nineteen!—she sometimes filled her drawing-room with very useless and unprofitable acquaintances. These two married ladies—one young, the other old—Mrs. Hill and Mrs. Thornycroft—had been



for the last half-hour vexing their very hearts out to find Agatha a husband—a weakness which, it must be confessed, lurks in the heart of almost every married lady.

Agatha had been laughing at it, alternately flushing up or looking scornful, as her mouth had a natural propensity for looking; balancing herself occasionally on the arm of the sofa, which, being rather small and of a light figure, she could do with both impunity and grace; or else rushing to the open window, ostensibly to let her black kitten investigate street-sights from its mistress's shoulder. Agatha was now and then very much of a child still, or could be when she chose.

Mrs. Hill had been regretting some two or three "excellent matches" of which she felt sure Miss Bowen had thrown away her chance; and young Mrs. Thornycroft had tried hard to persuade her dearest Agatha

how very much happier she would be in a house of her own, than as a boarder even in this excellent physician's family. But Agatha only laughed on, and devoted herself more than ever to the black kitten.

She was, I fear, a damsel who rather neglected the *bienséances* of life. Only, in her excuse, it must be allowed that her friends were doing what they had no earthly business to do ; since, if there is one subject above all upon which a young woman has a right to keep her thoughts, feelings, and intentions to herself, and to exact from others the respect of silence, it is that of marriage. Possibly, Agatha Bowen was of this opinion.

"Mrs. Hill, you are a very kind, good soul ; and Emma Thornycroft, I like you very much ; but if—(Oh ! be quiet, Tittens !)—if you could manage to let me and ' my Husband ' alone."

These were the only serious words she

said—and they were but half serious ; she evidently felt such an irresistible propensity to laugh.

“Now,” continued she, turning the conversation, and putting on a dignified aspect, which occasionally she took it into her head to assume, though more from playfulness than earnest—“now let me tell you who you will meet here at dinner to-day.”

“Major Harper, of course.”

“I do not see the ‘of course,’ Mrs. Thornycroft,” returned Agatha, rather sharply ; then melting into a smile, she added : “Well, ‘of course,’ as you say ; what more likely visitor could I have than my guardian ?”

“Trustee, my dear ; guardians belong to romances, where young ladies are always expected to hate, or fall in love with them.”

Agatha's face flushed slightly. Now, unlike most girls, Miss Bowen did not look

pretty when she blushed ; her skin being very dark, and not over clear, the red blood coursing under it dyed her cheek, not “ celestial, rosy red,” but a warm mahogany colour. Perhaps a consciousness of this deepened the unpleasant blushing fit, to which, like most sensitive natures at her age, she was always rather prone.

“ Not,” continued Mrs. Thornycroft, watching her,—“ not that I think any love affair is likely to happen in your case ; Major Harper is far too much of a settled-down bachelor, and at the same time too old.”

Agatha pulled a comical face, and made a few solemn allusions to Methuselah. She had a peculiarly quick, even abrupt manner of speaking, saying a dozen words in the time most young ladies would take to drawl out three ; and possessing, likewise, the rare feminine quality of never saying a word more than was necessary.

“Agatha, how funny you are!” laughed her easily-amused friend. “But, dear, tell me who else is coming?” And she glanced doubtfully down on a gown that looked like a marriage-silk “dyed and renovated.”

“Oh, no ladies—and gentlemen never see whether one is dressed in brocade or sack-cloth,” returned Agatha, rather maliciously; —“Only ‘old Major Harper,’ as you are pleased to call him, and——”

“Nay, I didn’t call him very old—just forty, or thereabouts—though he does not look anything like it. Then he is so handsome, and, I must say, Agatha, pays you such attention.”

Agatha laughed again—the quick, light-hearted laugh of nineteen—and her brown eyes brightened with innocent pleasure.

Young Mrs. Thornycroft again looked down uneasily at her dress—not from over-much vanity, but because her bounded

mind recurred instinctively from extraneous or large interests to individual and lesser ones.

"Is there really any one particular coming, my dear? Of course, *you* have no trouble about evening dress; mourning is such easy, comfortable wear." (Agatha turned her head quickly aside.) "That handsome silk of yours looks quite well still; and mamma there," glancing at the contentedly-knitting Mrs. Hill—"old ladies never require much dress; but if you had only told me to prepare for company——"

"Pretty company! Merely our own circle—Dr. Ianson, Mrs. Ianson, and Miss Ianson—you need not mind outshining her now——"

"No, indeed! I am married."

"Then the 'company' dwindles down to two besides yourselves; Major Harper and his brother."

“ Oh ! What sort of a person is the brother ? ”

“ I really don't know ; I have never seen him. He is just come home from Canada ; the youngest of the family — and I hate boys,” replied Agatha, running the sentences one upon the other in her quick fashion.

“ The youngest of the family—how many are there in all ? ” inquired the elder lady, her friendly anxiety being probably once more on matrimonial thoughts intent.

“ I am sure, Mrs. Hill, I cannot tell. I have never seen any of them but Major Harper, and I never saw him till my poor father died ; all which circumstances you know quite well, and Emma too ; so there is no need to talk a thing twice over.”

From her occasional mode of speech, some people might say, and did say, that Agatha Bowen “ had a temper of her own.” It is very true, she was not one of those mild,

amiable heroines who never can give a sharp word to any one. And now and then, probably from the morbid restlessness of unsatisfied youth—a youth, too, that fate had deprived of those home-ties, duties, and sacrifices, which are at once so arduous and so wholesome—she had a habit of carrying, not only the real black kitten, but the imaginary and allegorical “little black dog,” on her shoulder.

It was grinning there invisibly now ; shaking her curls with short quick motion, swelling her rich full lips—those sort of lips which are glorious in smiles, but which in repose are apt to settle into a gravity not unlike crossness.

She was looking thus—not her best, it must be allowed—when a servant, opening the drawing-room door, announced “Visitors for Miss Bowen.”

The first who entered, very much in



advance of the other, appeared with that easy, agreeable air which at once marks the gentleman, and one long accustomed to the world in all its phases, especially to the feminine phase ; for he bowed over Agatha's hand, and smiled in Agatha's now brightening face, with a sort of tender manliness, that implied his being used to pleasing women, and having an agreeable though not an ungenerous consciousness of the fact.

“Are you better—really better? Are you quite sure you have no cold left? Nothing to make your friends anxious about you?” (Agatha shook her head smilingly.)  
“That's right ; I am so glad.”

And no doubt Major Harper was ; for a true kind-heartedness, softened even to tender-heartedness, was visible in his handsome face. Which face had been for twenty years the admiration of nearly every woman in every drawing-room he entered: a consi-

derable trial for any man. Now and then some independent young lady, who had reasons of her own for preferring rosy complexions, turn-up noses, and "runaway" chins, might quarrel with the Major's fine Roman profile and jet-black moustache and hair; but—there was no denying it—he was, even at forty, a remarkably handsome man; one of the old school of Chesterfield perfection, which is fast dying out.

Everybody liked him, more or less; and some people—a few men and not a few women, had either in friendship or in warmer fashion—deeply loved him. Society in general was quite aware of this; nor, it must be confessed, did Major Harper at all attempt to disprove or ignore the fact. He wore his honours—as he did a cross won, no one quite knew how, during a brief service in the Peninsula—neither pompously nor boastingly, but with the mild indifference of conscious desert.

All this could be at once discerned in his face, voice, and manner ; from which likewise, a keen observer might draw the safe conclusion that, though a decided man of fashion, and something of a dandy, he was above either puppyism or immorality. And Agatha's rich Anglo-Indian father had not judged foolishly when he put his only child and her property in the trust of, as he believed, that rare personage, an honest man.

If the girl Agatha, who took honesty as a matter of course in every gentleman, endowed this particular one with a few qualities more than he really possessed, it was an amiable weakness on her part, for which, as Major Harper would doubtless have said with a seriously troubled countenance, "no one could possibly blame *him*."

In speaking of the Major we have taken little notice—as little, indeed, as Agatha did—of the younger Mr. Harper.

“ My brother, Miss Bowen. He came home when my sister Emily died.” The brief introduction terminated in a slight fall of voice, which made the young lady look sympathisingly at the handsome face that took shades of sadness as easily as shades of mirth. In her interest for the Major she merely bowed to his brother; just noticed that the stranger was a tall, fair “ boy,” not at all resembling her own friend; and after a polite speech or two of welcome, to which Mr. Harper answered very briefly, she hardly looked at him again until she and her guests adjourned to the family drawing-room of Dr. Ianson.

There, the Major happening to be engrossed by doing earnest politeness to Mrs. Thornycroft and her mother, Agatha had to enter side by side with the younger brother, and likewise to introduce him to the worthy family whose inmate she was.

She did so, making the whole circuit of the room towards Miss Jane Ianson, in the hope that he would cast anchor, or else be grappled by, that young lady, and so she should get rid of him. However, fate was adverse; the young gentleman showed no inclination to be thus put aside, and Miss Bowen, driven to despair, was just going to extinguish him altogether with some specimen of the unceremonious manner which she occasionally showed to "boys," when, observing him more closely, she discovered that he could not exactly come under this category.

His fair face, fair hair, and thin, stripling-like figure, had deceived her. Investigating deeper, there was a something in his grave eye and firmly-set mouth which bespoke the man, not the boy. Agatha, who, treating him with a careless womanly superiority that girls of nineteen use, had asked "how

long he had been in Canada?" and been answered "Fifteen years,"—hesitated at her next intended question—the very rude and malicious one—"How old he was when he left home?"

"I was, as you say, very young when I quitted England," he answered, to a less pointed remark of Miss Ianson's. "I must have been a lad of nine or ten—little more."

Agatha quite started, to think of the disrespectful way in which she had treated a gentleman twenty-five years old! It made her shy and uncomfortable for some minutes, and she rather repented of her habit of patronising "boys."

However, what was even twenty-five? A raw, uncouth age. No man was really good for anything until he was thirty. And, as quickly as courtesy and good feeling allowed her, she glided from the uninteresting younger

brother, to the charmed circle where the elder was talking away, as only Major Harper could talk, using all the weapons of conversation by turns, to a degree that never can be truly described. Like Taglioni's *entrechats*, or Grisi's melodious notes, such extrinsic talent dies on the senses of the listener, who cannot prove, scarcely even explain, but only say that it was so. Nevertheless, with all his power of amusing, a keen observer might have discerned in Major Harper a want of depth—of reading—of thought; a something that marked out *l'homme de société* in contradiction to the man of intellect or of letters. Had he been an author—which he was once heard to thank Heaven he was not—he would probably have been one of those shallow, fashionable sentimentalists who hang like Mahomed's coffin between earth and heaven, an eyesore unto both. As it was, his modicum of talent made him

a most pleasant man in his own sphere—the drawing-room.

“Really,” whispered the good, corpulent Dr. Ianson, who had been laughing so much that he quite forgot dinner was behind time, “my dear Miss Bowen, your friend is the most amusing, witty, delightful person. It is quite a pleasure to have such a man at one’s table.”

“Quite a pleasure, indeed,” echoed Mrs. Ianson, deeply thankful to anything or anybody that stood in the breach between herself, her husband, and the dilatory cook.

Agatha looked gratified and proud. Casting a shy glance towards where her friend was talking to Emma Thornycroft and Miss Ianson, she met the eye of the younger brother. It expressed such keen, though grave observance of her, that she felt her cheeks warm into the old, unbecoming, uncomfortable blush.



It was rather a satisfaction that, just then, they were summoned to dinner; Major Harper, in his half tender, half paternal manner, advancing to take her downstairs; which was his custom, when, as frequently happened, Agatha Bowen was the woman he liked best in the room. This was indeed his usual way in all societies, except when out of his kindliness of heart he now and then made a temporary sacrifice in favour of some woman who he thought liked *him* best. Though even in this case, perhaps, he would not have erred, or felt that he erred, in offering his arm to Agatha.

She looked happy, as any young girl would, in receiving the attentions of a man whom all admired; and was quite contented to sit next to him, listening while he talked cheerfully and brilliantly, less for her personal entertainment than that of the table in general. Which she thought, considering

the dulness of the Ianson circle, and that even her own kind-hearted, long-known friend, Emma Thornycroft, was not the most intellectual woman in the world,—showed great good nature on the part of Major Harper.

Perhaps the most silent person at table was the younger brother, whose Christian name Agatha did not know. However, hearing the Major call him once or twice by an odd-sounding word, something like “Reynell” or “Ennell,” she had the curiosity to inquire.

“Oh, it is *N. L.*—his initials; which I call him by, instead of the very ugly name his cruel godfathers and godmothers imposed upon him as a life-long martyrdom.”

“What name is that?” asked Agatha, looking across at the luckless victim of nomenclature, who seemed to endure his woes with great equanimity.

He met her eye, and answered for himself, showing he had been listening to her all the time. "I am called Nathanael—it is an old family name—Nathanael Locke Harper."

"You don't look very like a Nathanael," observed his neighbour, Mrs. Thornycroft, doubtless wishing to be complimentary.

"I think he does," said Agatha, kindly, for she was struck by the infinitely sweet and "good" expression which the young man's face just then wore. "He looks like the Nathanael of Scripture, 'in whom there was no guile.'"

A pause—for the Iansons were those sort of religious people who think any Biblical allusions irreverent—except on Sundays. But Major Harper said, heartily, "That's true!" and cordially, nay affectionately, pressed Agatha's hand. Nathanael slightly coloured, as if with pleasure, though he made no answer

of any kind. He was evidently unused to bandy either jests or compliments.

If anything could be objected to in a young man so retiring and unobtrusive as he, it was a certain something the very opposite of his brother's cheerful frankness. His features, regular, delicate, and perfectly colourless ; his hair long, straight, and of the palest brown, without any shadow of what painters would call a " warm tint," auburn or gold, running through it ; his slow, quiet movements, rare speech, and a certain passive composure of aspect, altogether conveyed the impression of a nature which, if not positively repellant, was decidedly cold.

Agatha felt it, and though from the rule of opposites, this species of character awoke in her a spice of interest ; yet was the interest of too faint and negative a kind to attract her more than momentarily.

In her own mind she set down Nathanael Harper as "a very odd sort of youth"—(*a youth* she still persisted in calling him)—and turned again to his brother.

They had dined late, and the brief evening bade fair to pass as after-dinner evenings do. Arrived in the drawing-room, old Mrs. Hill went to sleep; Miss Ianson, a pale young woman, in delicate health, disappeared; Mrs. Ianson and Mrs. Thornycroft commenced a low-toned, harmless conversation, which was probably about "servants" and "babies." Agatha being at that age when domestic affairs are very uninteresting, and girlish romance has not yet ripened into the sweet and solemn instincts of motherhood, stole quietly aside, and did the very rude thing of taking up a book and beginning to read "in company." But, as before stated, Miss Agatha had a will of her own, which she usually followed out, even when it ran a

little contrary to the ultra-refined laws of propriety.

The book not being sufficiently interesting, she was beginning like many another clever girl of nineteen to think the society of married ladies a great bore, and to wonder when the gentlemen would come up-stairs. Her wish was shortly gratified by the door's opening—but only to admit the “youth” Nathanael.

However, partly for civility, and partly through lack of entertainment, Agatha smiled upon even him, and tried to make him talk.

This was not an easy matter, since in all qualities he seemed to be his elder brother's opposite. Indeed, his reserve and brevity of speech emulated Agatha's own; so they got on together ill enough, until by some happy chance they lighted on the subject of Canada and the Backwoods. Where is there boy or girl of romantic imagination who did

not, at some juvenile period of existence, revel in descriptions of American forest-life? Agatha had scarcely passed this, the latest of her various manias; and on the strength of it, she and Mr. Harper became more sociable. She even condescended to declare "that it was a pleasure to meet with one who had absolutely seen, nay, lived among red Indians."

"Ay, and nearly died among them too," added Major Harper, coming up so unexpectedly, that Agatha had not noticed him. "Tell Miss Bowen how you were captured, tied to the stake, half-tomahawked, &c.—how you lived Indian fashion for a whole year, till you were sixteen. Wonderful lad! A second Nathaniel Bumppo!" added he, tapping his brother's shoulder.

The young man drew back, merely answered "that the story would not interest

Miss Bowen," and retired, whether out of pride or shyness it was impossible to say.

The conversation, taken up and led, as usual, by Major Harper, became a general disquisition on the race of North American Indians. Accidentally, or not, the elder brother drew from the younger many facts, indicating a degree of both information and experience, which made every one glance with surprise, respect, and a little awe, on the delicate, boyish-looking Nathanael.

Once, too, Agatha took her turn as an object of interest to the rest. They were all talking of the distinctive personal features of that strange race, which some writers have held to be the ten lost tribes of Israel. Agatha asked what were the characteristics of an Indian face, often stated to be so fine?

"Look in the mirror, Miss Bowen," said Nathanael, joining in the conversation.



“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that were you not an English-woman, I should have thought you descended from a Pawnee Indian—all except the hair. The features are exact—long, almond-shaped eyes, aquiline nose, mouth and chin of the rare classic mould, which these children of nature keep, long after it has almost vanished out of civilised Europe. Then your complexion, of such a dark ruddy brown—your——”

“Stop—stop!” cried the Major, heartily laughing. “Miss Bowen will think you have learnt every one of her physical peculiarities off by heart already. I had not the least idea you were gifted with so much observation.”

“Nay, do let him go on; it amuses me,” cried the young girl, laughing, though she could not help blushing a little also.

But Nathanael had “shrunk into his shell,”

as his brother humorously whispered to Agatha, and was not to be drawn out for the remainder of the evening.

The Harpers left early, thus affording great opportunity for their characters being discussed afterwards. Every lady in the room had long since declared herself "in love" with the elder brother; the fact was now repeated for the thousandth time, together with one or two remarks about the younger Harper, whom they agreed was rather nice-looking, but *so* eccentric !

Miss Bowen scarcely thought about Nathanael at all; except that, after she was in bed, a comical recollection floated through other more serious ones, and she laughed outright at the notion of being considered like a Pawnee Indian !

## CHAPTER II.

OF all the misfortunes incidental to youth (falling in love included), there are few greater than that of having nothing to do. From this trial, Agatha Bowen, being unhappily a young lady of independent property, suffered martyrdom every day. She had no natural ties, duties, or interests, and was not sufficiently selfish to create the like in and about her own personality. She did not think herself handsome enough to be vain, so had not that sweet refuge of feminine idleness—dress. Nor, it must be dolefully confessed, was she of so loving a nature

as to love anybody or everybody, as some women can.

Kind to all, and liking many, she was apparently one of those characters who only really *love* two or three people in the whole course of their existence. To such, life is a serious, périlous, and often terrible journey.

“ Well, Tittens, I don’t know, really, what we are to do with ourselves this morning,” said Agatha, talking aloud to her Familiar, the black kitten, who shared the solitude of her little drawing-room. “ You’d like to go and play down stairs, I dare say? It’s all very nice for you to be running after Mrs. Ianson’s wools, but I can’t see anything amusing in fancy-work. And as for dawdling round this square and Russell-square with Jane Ianson and Fido—pah! I’d quite as soon be changed into a lap-dog, and led along by a string. How stupid London is! Oh, Tittens, to think that you and I have

never lived in the country since we were born. Wouldn't you like to go? Only, then we should never see——”

The foolish girl paused, and laughed, as if she did not like to soliloquise too confidentially, even to a kitten.

“Which of them did you like the best last night, Tittens? One was not over civil to you; but Nathanael—yes, certainly you and that juvenile are great friends, considering you have met but four evenings. All in one week, too. Our house is getting quite gay, Miss Tittens; only it is so much the duller in the mornings. Heigho!

Life's a weary, weary, weary,  
Life's a weary coble o' care.”

“What's the other verse?” And she began humming:

“Man's a steerer, steerer, steerer,  
Man's a steerer—life is a pool.”

"I wonder, Tittens, how you and I shall steer through it? and whether the pool will be muddy or clear?"

Twisting her fingers in and about her little pet's jetty fur, Agatha sat silent, until slowly there grew a thoughtful shadow in her eyes, a forewarning of the gradual passing away of that childishness, which in her, from accidental circumstances, had lasted strangely long.

"Come, we won't be foolish, Tittens," cried she, suddenly starting up. "We'll put on our bonnets, and go out—that is, one of us will, and the other may take to Berlin wool and Mrs. Ianson."

The bonnet was popped on quickly and independently—Miss Bowen scorned to indulge in the convenience, or annoyance, of a lady's-maid. Crossing the hall, the customary question, "Whether she would be home to dinner?" stopped her.

"I don't know—I am not quite sure. Tell Mrs. Ianson not to wait for me."

And she passed out, feeling keener than usual the consciousness that nobody would wait for her, or look for her, or miss her; that her comings in and goings out were perfectly indifferent to every human being in the house, called by courtesy her "home." Perhaps this was her own fault, but she could not help it. It was out of her nature to get up an interest among ordinary people, where interests there were none.

Little more had she in the house whither she was going to pay one of her extempore visits ; but then there was the habit of old affection, began before characters develop themselves into the infinite variety from which mental sympathy is evolved. She could not help liking Emma Thornycroft, her sole childish acquaintance, whose elder sister had been Agatha's daily governess, until she died.

“I know Emma will be glad to see me, which is something; and if she does tire me with talk about the babies; why, children are better than Berlin wool. And there is always the piano. Besides, I must walk out, or I shall rust to death in this horrible Bedford-square.”

She walked on, rather in a misanthropic mood, a circumstance to her not rare. But she had never known mother, sister, or brother; and the name of father was to her little more than an empty sound. It had occasionally come mistily over the Indian seas, in the shape of formal letters—the only letters that ever visited the dull London house where she spent her shut-up childhood, and acquired the accomplishments of her teens. Mr. Bowen died on the high seas: and when his daughter met the ship at Southampton, a closed black coffin was all that remained to her of the name of father. That bond,



like all others, was destined to be to her a mere shadow. Poor Agatha !

Quick exercise always brings cheerfulness when one is young, strong, and free from any real cares. Agatha's imaginary ones, together with the vague sentimentalisms into which she was on the verge of falling, yet had not fallen, vanished under the influence of a cheerful walk on a sunny summer's day. She arrived at Mr. Thornycroft's time enough to find that admirable young matron busied in teaching to her eldest boy the grand mystery of dining ; that is, dining like a Christian, seated at a real table with a real silver knife and fork. These latter Master James evidently preferred poking into his eyes and nose, rather than his mouth, and evinced far greater anxiety to sit on the table than on the chair.

"Agatha, dear—so glad to see you !" and Emma's look convinced even Agatha

that this was true. "You will stay of course? Just in time to see James eat his first dinner, like a man! Now Jemmie, wipe his pretty mouth, and then give Auntie Agatha a sweet kiss."

Agatha submitted to the kiss, though she did not quite believe in the adjective; and felt a certain satisfaction in knowing that the title of "Auntie" was a mere compliment. She did not positively dislike children, else she would have been only half a woman, or a woman so detestable as to be an anomaly in creation; but her philoprogenitiveness was, to say the least, dormant at present; and her sense of infantile beauty being founded on Sir Joshua's and Murillo's cherubs, she had no great fancy for the ugly little James.

She laid aside her bonnet, and smoothing her curls in the nursery mirror, looked for one minute at her Pawnee-Indian face, the sight of which now often made her smile.

Then she sat down to lunch with Emma and the children; being allowed, as a great favour, to be placed next Master James, and drink with him out of his silver mug. Miss Bowen accepted the offered honour calmly, made no remark, but—went thirsty.

For an hour or two she sat patiently listening to what had gone on in the house since she was there—how baby had cut two more teeth, and James had had a new braided frock—(which was sent for that she might look at it)—how Missy had been to her first children's party, and was to learn dancing at Midsummer, if papa could be coaxed to agree.

“How is Mr. Thornycroft?” asked Agatha.

“Oh, very well—papa is always well. I only wish the little ones took after him in that respect.”

Agatha, who was old enough to remember Emma engaged, and Emma newly-married;

smiled to think how entirely the lover beloved, and the all-important young husband had dwindled into a mere "Papa;" liked and obeyed in a certain fashion, for Emma was a good wife, but evidently made a very secondary consideration to "the children."

The young girl, as yet neither married, nor in love—wondered if this were always so. She often had such wonderings and speculations when she came to Emma's house.

She was growing rather tired of so much domestic information, and had secretly taken out her watch to see how many hours it would be to dinner and to Mr. Thornycroft, a sensible, intelligent man, who from love to his wife had been always very kind to his wife's friends—when there came the not unwelcome sound of a knock at the hall-door.

"Bless me; that is surely the Harpers. I had quite forgotten Major Harper and the bears."

“An odd conjunction,” observed Agatha, smiling.

“Major Harper, who yesterday, for the fifth time, promised to take Missy to the Zoological Gardens to see the bears. He has remembered it at last.”

No, he had not remembered it; it would have been a very remarkable circumstance if he had; being a person so constantly full of engagements, for himself and others. The visitor was only his younger brother, who had often daundered in at Mrs. Thornycroft's house, possibly from a liking to Emma's friendly manner, or because, cast astray for a fortnight on the wide desert of London, he had, like Agatha, “nothing to do.”

If Nathanael had other reasons, they, of course, never came near the surface, but lay buried under the silent waters of his quiet mind.

Agatha was half pleased, half disappointed

at seeing him. Mrs. Thornycroft, good soul, was always charmed to have a visitor, for her society did not attract many. Only betraying, as usual, what was uppermost in her simple thoughts, she could not long conceal her regret concerning little Missy and the bears.

To Agatha's great surprise, Mr. Harper, who she thought, in his dignified gravity would never have condescended to such a thing, volunteered to assume his brother's duty.

"For," said he, with a slight smile, "I have had too many perilous encounters with wild bears in America, not to feel some curiosity in seeing a few captured ones in England."

"That will be charming," cried Mrs. Thornycroft, looking at him with a mixture of respect and maternal benignity. "Then you can tell Missy all those wonderful stories, only don't frighten her."

"Perhaps I might. She seems rather shy of me." And the adventurous young gentleman eyed askance a small be-ribboned child, who was creeping about the room and staring at him. "Would it not be better if——"

"If mamma went? There, Missy, don't cry; mamma will go, and Agatha, too, if she would like it?"

"Certainly," Miss Bowen answered, with a mischievous glance at Nathanael. "I ought to investigate bears, if only to prove myself descended from a Pawnee Indian."

So, once more, the heavy nut-brown curls was netted up into the crown of her black bonnet; and her shawl pinned on carelessly—rather too carelessly for a young woman; since that gracious adornment, neatness, rarely increases with years. Agatha was quickly ready. In the ten minutes she had to wait for Mrs. Thornycroft, she felt, more than once, how much merrier they would

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have been with the elder than the younger brother. Also—for Agatha was a conscientious girl—she thought, seriously, what a pity it was that so pleasant and kind a man as Major Harper had such an unfortunate habit of forgetting his promises.

Yet she regretted him—regretted his flow of witty sayings that attracted the humorous half of her temperament, and his touches of seriousness or sentiment which hovered like pleasant music round the yet-closed portals of her girlish heart. Until suddenly — conscientiousness again ! — she began to be aware she was thinking a great deal too much of Major Harper ; so, with a strong effort, turned her attention to his brother and the bears.

She had leant on Mr. Harper's offered arm all the way to the Regent's Park, yet he had scarcely spoken to her. No wonder, therefore, that she had had time for medita-

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tion, or that her comparison between the two brothers should be rather to Nathanael's disadvantage. The balance of favour, however, began to right itself a little when she saw how kind he was to Emma Thornycroft, who alternately screamed at the beasts, and made foolish remarks concerning them ; also, how carefully he watched over little Missy and James, the latter of whom, with infantile pertinacity, would poke his small self into every possible danger.

At the sunken den, where the big brown bear performs gymnastic exercises on a centre tree, Master Jemmie was quite in his glory. He emulated Bruin by climbing from his feet into nurse's arms—thence into mamma's, and lastly, much to her discomfiture, into Miss Bowen's. The attraction being that she happened to stand close to the railing and next to Mr. Harper, who, with a bun stuck on the end of his long stick,

had coaxed Bruin up to the very top of the tree.

There the creature swayed awkwardly, his four unwieldly paws planted together, and his great mouth silently snapping at the cakes. Agatha could hardly help laughing; she, as well as the children, was so much amused at the monster.

“Mr. Harper, give Missy your cane. Missy would like to feed bear,” cried the mamma, now very bold, going with her eldest pet to the other side the den, and attracting the animal thither.

At which little James, who could not yet speak, setting up a scream of vexation, tried to stretch after the creature; and whether from his own impetuosity or her careless hold, sprang—oh, horror!—right out of Agatha's arms. A moment the little muslin frock caught on the railing—caught—ripped; then the sash, with its long knotted ends,

which some one snatched at—nothing but the sash held up the shrieking child, who hung suspended half way over the pit, in reach of the beast's very jaws.

The bear did not at once see it, till startled by the mother's frightful cries. Then he opened his teeth—it looked almost like a grin—and began slowly to descend his tree, while, as slowly, the poor child's sash was unloosing with its weight.

A murmur of horror ran through the people near ; but not a man among them offered help. They all slid back, except Nathanael Harper.

Agatha felt his sudden gripe. " Hold my hand firm. Keep me in my balance," he whispered, and throwing himself over to the whole extent of his body, and long right arm, managed to catch hold of James, who struggled violently.

" Hold me tight—tighter still, or we are lost," said he, trying to writhe back again ; his

hand,—such a little delicate hand it seemed for a man, quivering with the weight of the child.

She grasped him frantically—his wrist—his shoulder—nay, stretching over, linked her arms round his neck. Something in her touch seemed to impart strength to him. He whispered, half gasping,

“Hold me firm, and I’ll do it yet, Agatha.” She did not then notice, or recollect till long afterwards, how he had called her by her Christian name, nor the tone in which he had said it.

The moment afterwards, he had lifted the child out of the den, and poor Jemmie was screaming out his now harmless terror safe in the maternal arms.

Then, and not till then, Agatha burst into tears. Tears, which no one saw, for the mother, hugging her baby, was the very centre of a sympathising crowd. Mr. Harper, paler than ordinary, leaned against the stone-work of the den.

“Oh, from what have you not saved me!” cried Agatha, as after her thankfulness for the rescued life, came another thought, personal, yet excusable. “Had Emma lost the child, I should have felt like a murderess to the day of my death.”

Nathanael shook his head, trying to smile ; but seemed unable to speak.

“You have not hurt yourself?”

“Oh no. Very little. Only a strain,” said he as he removed his hand from his side. “Go to your friend ; I will come presently.”

He did come—though not for a good while ; and Miss Bowen fancied from his looks that he had been more injured than he acknowledged ; but she did not like to inquire. Nevertheless he rose greatly in her estimation, less for his courage than for the presence of mind and common sense which made it valuable, and for the self-restraint and indifference which caused him afterwards to

treat the whole adventure as such a trifling thing.

It was after all, nothing very romantic or extraordinary, and happened in such a brief space of time, that probably the circumstance is not noted in the traditionary chronicles of the Zoological Gardens, which contain the frightful legend carefully related that day by several keepers to Mrs. Thornycroft—how a bear had actually eaten up a child, falling in the same manner into the same den.

But the adventure, slight as it may appear, made a very great and sudden difference in the slender tie of acquaintanceship, hitherto subsisting between Agatha and Major Harper's brother. She began to treat Nathanael more like a friend, and ceased to think of him exactly as a "boy."

Master James's mamma, when she at last turned her attention from his beloved small self, was full of thanks to his preserver. Mr.

Harper assured her that his feat was merely a little exertion of muscular strength, and at last grew evidently uncomfortable at being made so much of. Returning home with them, he would fain have crept away from the scene of his honours ; but the good-natured, warm, motherly-hearted Emma, implored him to stay.

“ We will nurse you if you are hurt, which I am afraid you must be—it was such a dreadful strain ! Oh Jemmie, Jemmie ! ” and the poor mother shuddered.

“ Indeed you must come in,” added Miss Bowen kindly, seeing that Emma’s thoughts were floating away, as appeared this time natural enough, to her own concerns. “ You shall rest all the evening, and we will talk to you, and be very, very agreeable. Pray yield ! ”

Nathanael argued no more, but went in

"quite lamb-like," as Mrs. Thornycroft afterwards declared.

This acquiescence in him was little rewarded, Agatha thought—for the evening happened to be duller even than evenings usually passed at the Thornycrofts. The head of the household, being detained in the City, did not appear ; and Mrs. Thornycroft's tongue, unchecked by her husband's presence, and excited by the event of the afternoon, galloped on at a fearful rapidity. She poured out upon the luckless young man all the baby biography of her family, from Missy's christening down to the infant Selina's cutting of her first tooth. To all of which he listened with a praiseworthy attention, giving at least silence, which was doubtless all the answer Emma required.

But Agatha, whose sympathy in these things was, as before said, at present small, grew half ashamed, half vexed, and finally,



rather angry—especially when she saw the pale weariness that gradually overspread Mr. Harper's face. More than once she hinted that he should have the arm-chair, or lie down, or rest in some way; but he took not the least notice; sitting immoveably in his place, which happened to be next herself, and vaguely looking across the table towards Mrs. Thornycroft.

At nine o'clock, becoming paler than ever, he bestirred himself, and talked of leaving.

"I ought to be going too. It is not far, and as our roads agree, I will walk with you," said Agatha, simply.

He seemed surprised—so much so, that she almost blushed, and would have retracted, save for the consciousness of her own frank and kindly purpose. She had watched him closely, and felt convinced that he had been more injured than he confessed; so in her

enerous straightforward fashion, she wanted to "take care of him," until he was safe at his brother's door, which she could see from her own. And her solitary education had been conducted on such unworldly principles, that she never thought there was anything remarkable or improper in her proposing to walk home with a young man whom she knew she could trust in every way, and who was besides Major Harper's brother.

Nor did even the matronly Mrs. Thornycroft object to the plan—save that it took her visitors away so early. "Surely," she added, "you can't be tired out already."

Agatha had an ironical answer on the very tip of her tongue; but something in the clear, "good" eye of Nathanael repressed her little wickedness. So she only whispered to Emma that for various reasons she had wished to return early.

"Very well, dear, since you must go, I

am sure Mr. Harper will be most happy to escort you."

"If not, I hope he will just say so," added Agatha, very plainly.

He smiled; and his full, soft grey eye, fixed on hers, had an earnestness which haunted her for many a day. She began heartily to like Major Harper's brother, though only as his brother, with a sort of reflected regard, springing from that she felt for her guardian and friend.

This consciousness made her manner perfectly easy, cheerful, and kind, even though they were in the perilously sentimental position of two young people strolling home together in the soft twilight of a Midsummer evening; likewise occasionally stopping to look westward at a new moon, which peered at them round street-corners and through the open spaces of darkening squares. But

nothing could make these two at all romantic or interesting ; their talk on the road was on the most ordinary topics—chiefly bears.

“ You seem quite familiar with wild beast life,” Agatha observed. “ Were you a very great hunter ? ”

“ Not exactly, for I never could muster up the courage, or the cowardice, wantonly to take away life. I don't remember ever shooting anything, except in self-defence, which was occasionally necessary during the journeys that I used to make from Montreal to the Indian settlements with Uncle Brian.”

“ Uncle Brian,” repeated Agatha, wondering whether Major Harper had ever mentioned such a personage, during the two years of their acquaintance. She thought not, since her memory had always kept tenacious record of what he said about his relatives—which was at best but little. It was one of the few

things in him which jarred upon Agatha's feelings—Agatha, to whose isolation the idea of a family and a home was so pathetically sweet—his seeming so totally indifferent to his own. All she knew of Major Harper's kith and kin was, that he was the eldest brother of a large family, settled somewhere down in Dorsetshire.

These thoughts swept through her mind, as Agatha repeated rather interrogatively "Uncle Brian?"

"The same who fifteen years since took me out with him to America; my father's youngest brother. Has Frederick never told you of him? They two were great companions once."

"Oh, indeed!" And Agatha, seeing that Nathanael at least showed no dislike, but rather pleasure, in speaking of his family, thought she might harmlessly indulge her curiosity about the Harpers of Dorsetshire.

“And you went away with Mr. Brian Harper, at ten years old. How could your mother part with you?”

“She was dead—she died when I was born. But I ought to apologise for thus talking of family matters, which cannot interest you.”

“On the contrary, they do—very much,” cried Agatha; and then blushed at her own earnestness, at which Nathanael brightened up into positive warmth.

“How kind you are! how I wish you knew my sisters! It is so pleasant to me to know them at last, after writing to them and thinking about them for these many years. How you would like our home—I call it home, or getting that I have been only a visitor, and in a short time must go back to my real home, Montreal.”

“Must you indeed!” And Agatha felt sorry. She had been at once surprised and

gratified by the confidential way in which this usually reserved young man talked to her, and her alone. "Why do you live in America? You are not at all like our received notions of an American?"

"We cannot stay to discuss your 'notions,'" said he, smiling, as if he read her thoughts; "otherwise I might prove to you that it is quite possible to find such a thing as an American *gentleman*. But I have not in me either Yankee blood or education. I was English born; brought up in British Canada, and by Uncle Brian."

He spoke the latter words with a certain proud affection, as if the very naming of such a man were sufficient guarantee for himself. Agatha secretly wondered what could possibly be the reason that Major Harper had never even mentioned this wonderful uncle, whom Nathanael seemed to hold in such honour.

"Of course," he continued, "though I dearly like England, though"—and he sunk his voice a little—"though now it will be doubly hard to go away, I could never think of leaving Uncle Brian to spend his old age alone in the country of his adoption."

"No, no," returned Agatha, absently, her thoughts still running on this new Mr. Harper. "What profession is he?"

"Nothing now. He has led an unsettled life—always poor. But he took care to settle me in a situation under the Canadian Government, so his personal poverty does not signify. We both think ourselves well to do now."

Agatha's sense of womanly decorum could hardly keep her from pressing her companion's arm, in instinctive acknowledgment of his goodness. She thought his face looked absolutely beautiful.

However, restraining her quick impulses within the bounds of propriety, she walked



on. "And so you will again cross that fearful Atlantic Ocean?" she said at length, with a slight shudder. The young man saw her gesture, and looked surprised—nay, quite gladdened. But nevertheless he remained silent.

Agatha did the same, for the mention of the sea brought back to her the one only noteworthy incident of her life, which had given her this strange antipathy to the sea and to the thought of traversing it. But this subject—the horrible bugbear of her childhood—she rarely liked to recur to, even now; so it did not mingle in her conversation with Mr. Harper.

At last Nathanael said: "I would it were possible—indeed I have often vainly tried—to persuade Uncle Brian to come back to England. But since he will not, it is clearly right for me to return to Canada. Anne Valery says so."

“Anne Valery!” again repeated Agatha, catching at this second strange name with which she was supposed to be familiar.

“What, did you never hear of her—my father’s ward, my sisters’ chief friend—quite one of the family? Is it possible that my brother never spoke to you of Anne Valery?”

No; certainly not. Agatha was quite sure of that. The circumstance of Major Harper’s having a friend who bore the very suspicious and romantically-interesting name of Anne Valery, could never have slipped Miss Bowen’s memory. She answered Nathanael’s question in an abrupt negative; but all the way through Russell-square she silently pondered as to who, or what like, Anne Valery could be? finally sketching a fancy-portrait of a bewitching young creature, with blue eyes and golden hair—the style of beauty which Agatha most envied, because it was most unlike herself.

Ere reaching Dr. Ianson's door, her attention was called to Mr. Harper, whose feet dragged so wearily along, that Agatha was convinced that, in spite of his efforts to conceal it, he was seriously ill. Her womanly sympathy rose—she earnestly pressed him to come in and consult Dr. Ianson.

“No—no. Uncle Brian and I always cure ourselves. As he often says, ‘A man after forty is either a doctor or a fool.’”

“But you are only twenty-five.”

“Ay, but I have seen enough to make me often feel like a man of forty,” said he, smiling. “Do not mind me. That strain was rather too much; but I shall be all right in a day or two.”

“I hope so,” cried Agatha, anxiously; “since, did you suffer, I should feel as if it were all of my causing, and for me.”

“Do you think I should regret that?” said the young man, in a tone so low, that its

meaning scarcely reached her. Then, as if alarmed at his own words, he shook hands with her hastily, and walked down the square.

Agatha thought how different was the abrupt, singular manner of Nathanael from Major Harper's tender, lingering, courteous adieu. Nevertheless, she fulfilled her kind purpose towards the young man; and running to her own window, watched his retreating figure, till her mind was relieved by seeing him safely enter his brother's door.

## CHAPTER III.

A WEEK—nay, more than a week slipped by in the customary monotony of that large, placidly genteel, Russell-square house, and Agatha heard nothing of the house round the corner, which constituted one of the faint few interests of her existence. Sometimes she felt vexed at the lengthened absence of her friend and “guardian,” as she persisted in considering him; sometimes the thought of young Nathanael’s pale face crossed her fancy, awakening both sincere compassion and an uncomfortable doubt that all might not be going on quite right within the

half-drawn window-blinds, at which she now and then darted a curious glance.

At last her curiosity or interest rose to such a pitch, that it is to be feared that Agatha in her independent spirit, and ignorance of, or indifference to the world, might have committed the terrific impropriety of making a good-natured inquiry at the door of this bachelor-establishment. She certainly would, had it consisted only of the harmless youth Nathanael ; but then Major Harper, at the mention of whose name Mrs. Ianson now began to smile aside, and the invalid Jane to dart towards Agatha quick, inquisitive looks—No ; she felt an invincible repugnance to knocking, on any pretence, at Major Harper's door.

However, having nothing to do and little to think of, and, moreover, being under the unwholesome necessity of keeping all her thoughts

to herself, her conjectures grew into such a mountain of discomfort — partly selfish, partly from the hearty gratitude which had awoke in her towards the younger brother since the adventure with the bear—that Miss Bowen set off one fine morning, hoping to gain intelligence of her neighbours by the round-about medium of Emma Thornycroft.

But that excellent matron had had two of her children ill with some infantine disease, and had in consequence not a thought to spare for any one out of her own household. The name of Harper never crossed her lips until Agatha, using a safe plural, boldly asked the question, “Had Emma seen anything of them?”

Mrs. Thornycroft could not remember.—Yes, she fancied some one had called—Mr. Harper, perhaps; or no, it must have been the Major, for somebody had said something about

Mr. Nathanael's being ill or out of town. But the very day after that the measles came out on James, and poor little Missy had just been moved out of the night-nursery into the spare bedroom, &c., &c., &c.

The rest of Emma's information concerning her babies was, as they say in advertisements of lost property, "of no value to anybody but the original owner."

Agatha bestowed a passing regret on young Nathanael, whether he were ill or out of town; she would have liked to have seen more of him. But that Major Harper should contrive to saunter up to the Regent's Park to visit the Thornycrofts, and never find time to turn a street-corner to say "how d'ye do" to *her*! she thought it neither courteous nor kind.

There was little inducement to spend the day with Emma, who in her present mood and the state of her household, was a mere con-



versational Dr. Buchan—a walking epitome of domestic medicine. So Miss Bowen extended her progress; took an early dinner with Mrs. Hill, and stayed all the afternoon at that good old lady's silent and quiet lodgings, where there was neither piano nor books, save one, which Agatha patiently read aloud for two whole hours—"The Life of Elizabeth Fry." A volume uninteresting enough to a young creature like herself, yet sometimes smiting her with involuntary reflections, as she contrasted her own aimless, useless existence with the life of that worthy Quakeress—the prison-angel.

Having tired herself out, first with reading and then with singing—very prosy and lengthy ballads of the old school, which were the ditties Mrs. Hill always chose—Agatha departed much more cheerful than she came. So great strength and comfort is there in

having something to do, especially if that something happens to be, according to the old nursery-rhyme—

Not for ourself, but our neighbour.

Another day passed—which being rainy, made the Doctor's dull house seem more inane than ever to the girl's restless humour. In the evening, at his old-accustomed hour, Major Harper "dropped in," and Agatha forgot his sins of omission in her cordial welcome. Very cordial it was, and unaffected, such as a young girl of nineteen may give to a man of forty, without her meaning being ill-construed. But under it Major Harper looked pathetically sentimental and uncomfortable. Very soon he moved away, and became absorbed in delicate attentions towards the sick and suffering Jane Ianson.

Agatha thought his behaviour rather odd,

but generously put upon it the best construction possible—viz., his known kind-heartedness. So she herself went to the other side of the invalid couch, and tried to make mirth likewise.

Asking after Mr. Harper, she learnt that her friend had been acting as sick-nurse to his brother for some days.

“Poor fellow—he will not confess that he is ill, or what made him so. But I hope he will be about again soon, for they are anxiously expecting him in Dorsetshire. Nathanael is the ‘good boy’ of our family, and as worthy a creature as ever breathed.”

Agatha smiled with pleasure to see the elder brother waxing so generously warm; but when she smiled, Major Harper sighed, and cast his handsome eyes another way. All the evening he scarcely talked to her at all, but to Mrs. and Miss Ianson. Agatha was quite puzzled by this pointed avoidance, not

to say incivility, and had some thoughts of plainly asking him if he were vexed with her; but womanly pride conquered girlish frankness, and she was silent.

After tea their quartett was broken by a visitor, whom all seemed astonished to see, and none more so than Major Harper.

“Why, Nathanael, I thought you were safely disposed of with your sofa and book. What madness makes you come out to-night?”

“Inclination, and weariness,” returned the other, indifferently, as, without making more excuses or apologies, he dragged himself to the arm-chair, which Miss Bowen good-naturedly drew out for him, and slipped into the circle, quite naturally.

“Well, wilful lads must have their way,” cried his brother, “and I am only too glad to see you so much better.”

With that, the flow of the Major's winning

conversation re-commenced; in which current all the rest of the company lay like silent pebbles, only too happy to be bubbled round by such a pleasant and refreshing stream.

The younger Harper sat in his arm-chair, leaning his forehead on his hand, and from under that curve now and then looking at them all, especially Agatha.

At a late hour the brothers went away, leaving Mrs. and Miss Ianson in a state of extreme delight, and Miss Bowen in a mood that, to say the least, was thoughtful—more thoughtful than usual.

After that lively evening followed three dull days, consisting of a solitary forenoon, an afternoon walk through the squares, dinner, backgammon, and bed; the next morning, *da capo al fine*, and so on; a dance of existence as monotonous as that of the spheres, and not half so musical. On the fourth day, while Miss Bowen was out walking, Nathanael

Harper called to take leave before his journey to Dorsetshire. He stayed some time, waiting Agatha's return, Mrs. Ianson thought ; but finally changed his mind, and made an abrupt departure, for which the young lady was rather sorry than otherwise.

The fifth day, Emma Thornycroft appeared, and, strange to say, without any of her little ones ; still stranger, without many references to them on her lips, except the general information that they were all getting well now.

The busy woman evidently had something on her mind, and plunged at once *in medias res*.

" Agatha, dear, I came to have a little talk with you."

" Very well," said Agatha smiling ; and calmly prepared to give up her morning to the discussion of some knotty point in dress or infantile education. But she soon perceived that Emma's pretty face was too ominously

important for anything short of that gravest interest of feminine life — matrimony ; or more properly in this case—match-making.

“ Agatha, love,” repeated Emma, with the affectionate accent that was always quite real, but which now deepened under the circumstances of the case, “ do you know that young Northen has been speaking to Mr. Thornycroft about you again.”

“ I am very sorry for it,” was the short answer.

“ But, my dear, isn't it a great pity that you could not like the young man ? Such a good young man too, and with such a nice establishment already. If you could only see his house in Cumberland-terrace — the real Turkey carpets, inlaid tables, and damask chairs.”

“ But I can't marry carpets, tables, and chairs.”

“Agatha, you are *so* funny! Certainly not, without the poor man himself. But there is no harm in him, and I am sure he would make an excellent husband.”

“I sincerely hope so, provided he is not mine. Come, Tittens, tell Mrs. Thornycroft what *you* think on the matter,” cried the wilful girl, trying to turn the question off by catching her little favourite. But Emma would not thus be set aside. She was evidently well-primed with a stronger and steadier motive than what usually occupied and sufficed her easy mind.

“Ah—how can you be so childish! But when you come to my age——”

“I shall, in a few more years. I wonder if I shall be as young-looking as you, Emma?” This was a very adroit thrust on the part of Miss Agatha, but for once it failed.

“I hope and trust so, dear. That is, if



you have as good a husband as I have. Only, be he what he may, he cannot be such another as my dear James."

Agatha internally hoped he might not; for, much as she liked and respected Emma's good spouse, her ideal of a husband was certainly not Mr. James Thornycroft.

"Tell me," continued the anxious matron, keeping up the charge—"tell me, Agatha, do you ever intend to marry at all?"

"Perhaps so; I can't say. Ask Tittens!"

"Did you ever think in earnest of marrying? And"—here with an air of real concern Emma stole her arm round her friend's waist—"did you ever see anybody whom you fancied you could like, if he asked you?"

Agatha laughed, but the colour was rising in her brown cheek. "Tut, tut, what nonsense!"

"Look at me, dear, and answer seriously."

Agatha, thus hemmed in, turned her face

full round, and said, with some dignity, "I do not know, Emma, what right you have to ask me that question."

"Ah, it is so; I feared it was," sighed Emma, not in the least offended. "I often thought so, even before he hinted——"

"Who hinted—and what?"

"I can't tell you; I promised not. And of course you ought not to know. Oh, dear, what am I letting out!" added poor Mrs. Thornycroft, in much discomfiture.

"Emma, you will make me angry. What ridiculous notion have you got into your head? What on earth do you mean?" cried Miss Bowen, speaking quicker than her usual quick fashion, and dashing the kitten off her knee as she rose.

"Don't be vexed with me, my poor dear girl. It may not be so—I hope not; and even if it were, he is so handsome, so agreeable, and talks so beautifully—I am sure you

are not the first woman by many a dozen that has been in love with him."

"With whom?" was the sharp question, as Agatha grew quite pale.

"I must not say.—Ah, yes—I must. It may be a mere supposition. I wish you would only tell me so, and set my mind at rest, and his too. He is quite unhappy about it, poor man, as I see. Though, to be sure, he could not help it, even if you did care for him."

"Him—what 'him?'"

"Major Harper."

Agatha's storm of passion sank to a dead calm. She sat down again composedly, turning her flushed cheeks from the light.

"This is a new and very entertaining story. You will be kind enough, Emma, to tell me the whole, from beginning to end."

"It all lies in a nutshell, my dear. Oh, how glad I am that you take it so quietly.

Then, perhaps it is all a mistake, arising from your hearty manner to every one. I told him so, and said that he need not scruple visiting you, or be in the least afraid that—”

“That I was in love in him? He *was* afraid, then? He informed you so? Very kind of him! I am very much obliged to Major Harper.”

“There now—off you go again. Oh, if you would but be patient.”

“Patient—when the only friend I had insults me!—when I have neither father, nor brother—nobody—nobody—” She stopped, and her throat choked; but the struggle was in vain; she burst into uncontrollable tears.

“You have me, Agatha, always me, and James!” cried Emma, hanging about her neck, and weeping for company; until, very soon, the proud girl shut down the flood-gates of her passion, and became herself again. Herself—as she could not have been, were

there a mightier power dwelling in her heart than pride.

“Now, Emma, since you have seen how the thing has vexed me, though not”—and she laughed—“not as being one of the many dozens of fools in love with Major Harper—will you tell me how this amusing circumstance arose?”

“I really cannot, my dear. The whole thing was so hurried and confused. We were talking together, very friendly and sociably, as the Major and I always do, about you ; and how much I wished you to be settled in life, as he must wish likewise, being the trustee of your little fortune, and standing in a sort of fatherly relation towards you. He did not seem to like the word ; looked very grave and very——”

“Compassionate, doubtless ! Said ‘he had reason to believe, that is to fear, I did not

regard him quite as a father !' That was it, Emma, I suppose ?"

"Well, my dear, I am glad to see you laughing at it. I don't remember his precise words."

"Probably these : 'My dear Mrs. Thornycroft, I am greatly afraid poor Agatha Bowen is dying for love of me.' Very candid—and like a gentleman !"

"Now you are too sarcastic ; for he *is* a gentleman, and most kind-hearted too. If you had only seen how grieved he was at the bare idea of your being made unhappy on his account !"

"How considerate !—and how very confidential he must have been to you."

"Nay, he hardly said anything plainly : I assure you he did not. Only somehow he gave me the impression that he was afraid of—what I had feared for a long time. For as

I always told you, Agatha, Major Harper is a settled bachelor—too old to change. Besides, he has had so many women in love with him."

"Does he count their names, one by one, on his fingers, and hang their locks of hair on his paletot, after the Indian-fashion Nathanael Harper told us of?—Poor innocent Nathanael!" And on her excited mood that pale "good" face rose up like a vision of serenity. She ceased to mock so bitterly at Nathanael's brother and her own once honoured friend.

"I don't like your abusing Major Harper in this way," said Emma, gravely; "we all know his little weaknesses, but he is an excellent man, and my husband likes him. And it is nothing so very wonderful if he has been rather confidential with a steady married woman like me—just the right person, in short. It was for your good too, my dear. I am sure

I asked him plainly if he ever could think of marrying you? But he shook his head, and answered, 'No, that was quite impossible.'

"Quite impossible, indeed," said Agatha, her proud lips quivering. "And should he favour you with any more confidences, you may tell him that Agatha Bowen never knew what it was to be 'in love' with any man. Likewise, that were he the only man on earth, she would not condescend to fall in love with, or marry Major Frederick Harper.—Now Emma, let us go down to lunch."

They would have done so, after Mrs. Thornycroft had kissed and embraced her friend, in sincere delight that Agatha was quite heart-whole, and ready to make what she called "a sensible marriage," but they were stopped on the stairs by a letter that came by post.

"A strange hand," Miss Bowen observed,



carelessly. "Will you go down-stairs, Emma, and I will come when I have read it."

But Agatha did not read it. She threw it on the floor, and turning the bolt of the door, paced her little drawing-room in extreme agitation.

"I am glad I did not love him—I thank God I did not love him," she muttered by fits. "But I might have done so, so good and kind as he was, and I so young, with no one to care for. And no one cares for me—no one—no one!"

"Young Northen" darted through her mind, but she laughed to scorn the possibility. What love could there be in an empty-headed fool?

"Never any but fools have ever made love to me! Oh, if an honest, noble man did but love me, and I could marry, and get out of this friendless desolation, this contemptible, scheming, match-making set, where I and my

feelings are talked of, speculated on, banded about from house to house. It is horrible—horrible! But I'll not cry! No!"

She dried the tears that were scorching her eyes, and mechanically took up her letter; until, remembering how long she had been up-stairs, and how all that time Emma's transparent disposition and love of talk might have laid her and her whole affairs open before the Iansons, she quickly put the epistle in her pocket, and went down into the dining-room.

It was not till night, when she sat idly brushing out her long curls, and looking at her Pawnee face in the mirror—alas! the poor face now seemed browner and uglier than ever!—that Agatha recollected her unopened letter.

"It may give me something to think about, which will be well," sighed she; and carelessly pushing her hair behind her ears, she

drew the candle nearer, and began leisurely to read.

The commencement was slightly abrupt :

“ A month ago—had any one told me I should write this letter, I could not have believed it possible. But strange things happen in our lives—things over which we seem to have no control ; we are swept on by an impulse and a power which most often guide us for our good. I hope it may be so now.

“ I came to England with no intention save that of seeing my family, and no affection in my heart stronger than for them. Living the solitary life that Uncle Brian leads, I have met with few women, and have never loved any woman—until now.

“ You may think me a ‘boy ;’ indeed, I overheard you say so once ; but I am a man—with a heart full of all a man’s emotions, passionate and strong. Into that heart I

took *you*, from the first moment I ever saw your face. This is just three weeks ago, but it might have been three years—I know you so well. I have watched you continually; every trait of your character—every thought of your mind. From other people I have found out every portion of your history—every daily action of your life. I know you wholly and completely, faults and all, and—I love you. No man will ever love you more than I.

“That you should love me now, is, I am aware, unlikely ; indeed, almost impossible; therefore I shall not expect or desire any answer to this letter, sent just before I leave for Dorsetshire.

“On my return, a week hence, I shall come and see you, should you not forbid it. I shall come merely as *a friend*, so that you need have no scruple in my visiting you, once at least. If afterwards, when you know me

better, you should suffer me to ask for another title, giving to you the dearest and closest that man can give to woman—then—oh ! little you think how I would love you, Agatha !

“NATHANAEL LOCKE HARPER.”

Agatha read this letter all through with a kind of fascination. Her first emotion was that of most utter astonishment. It had never crossed her mind that Nathanael Harper was the sort of being very likely to love any one—and for him to love her ! With such a love, too, that despite its suddenness carried with it the impression of quiet depth, strength, and endurance irresistible. It was beyond belief.

She read over again fragments of his own words. “I took you into my heart from the first moment I ever saw you ;”—“I love you —no man will ever love you more than I ;”

“Little you think how I would love you, Agatha !”

Agatha—who a minute before had been pondering mournfully that no one cared for her—that she was of no use to any one—and that no living soul would miss her, were her existence blotted out from the face of earth that very night !

She began to tremble ; ay, even though she felt that Nathanael had judged correctly—that she did not now love him, and probably never might —still, overwhelmed with the sudden sense of *his* great love, she trembled. A strange softness crept over her ; and for the second time that day she yielded to a weakness only drawn from her proud heart by rare emotions—Agatha wept.

## CHAPTER IV.

To say that Agatha Bowen slept but ill that night would be unnecessary: since there is probably no girl who did not do so after receiving a first love-letter. And this was indeed her first; for the common-place and business-like episode of young Northen had not been beautified by any such compositions. A second harmless adventure of like kind had furnished her with a little amusement and some vexation,—but never till now had her girlish heart been approached by any wooing which she could instinctively feel was that of real love. It touched her very much; for a time absorbing all distinct resolutions

or intentions in a maze of pleasant, tender pity, and wonderment not unmixed with fear.

Half the night she lay awake, planning what she should do and say in the future; writing in her tired brain a dozen imaginary answers to Mr. Harper's letter, until she recollected that he had expressly stated it required none. Nevertheless, she thought she must write, if only to tell him that she did not love him, and that there was not the slightest use in his hoping to be anything more to her than a friend.

"A friend!" She recoiled at the word, remembering how sorely her pride and feelings had been wounded by him she once held to be the best friend she had. She never could hold him as such any more. Her impulsive anger exaggerated even to contemptibleness the vanity of a man who fancied every woman was in love with him. She forgot all Major Harper's good qualities, his high sense



of honour, his unselfish kind-heartedness, his generous, gay spirit. She set him down at once as unworthy the name of friend. Then—what friend had she? Not one—not one in the world.

In this strait, strangely, temptingly sweet seemed to come the words, "*I love you ; no man will ever love you better than I.*"

To one whose heart is altogether free, the knowledge of being deeply loved, and by a man whose attachment would do honour to any woman, is a thought so soothing, so alluring, that from it spring half the marriages—not strictly love-marriages—which take place in the world ; sometimes, though not always, ending in real happiness.

Agatha began to consider that it would seem very odd if she wrote to Mr. Harper, in his home, among his family. Perhaps his sisters might notice her handwriting—a useless fear,

since they had never seen it; and at all events it would be a pity to trouble his happiness in that pleasant visit, by conveying prematurely the news of his rejection. She would wait, and give him no answer for at least a day or two; it was such a bitter thing to inflict pain to any human being, especially to one so gentle and good as Nathanael Harper.

With this determination she went to sleep.

She woke next morning, having a confused sense that something had happened, that some one had grieved and offended her; and—strange consciousness, softly dawning!—that some one loved her—deeply, dearly, as she had never been loved before. That even now some one might be thinking of her—of her alone, as his first object in the world. The sensation was new, inexplicable, but pleasant nevertheless. It made her feel—

what the desolate orphan girl rarely had felt—a sort of tenderness for, and honouring of herself. As she dressed, she once looked wistfully, even pensively, in the looking-glass.

“It is certainly a queer, brown, Pawnee face! I wonder what he could see in it to admire. But he is very kind, very! I wish I could have cared for him!”

Her heart trembled; all the woman in her was touched. But Agatha was resolved not to be sentimental, so she fastened her morning-dress rather more tastefully than usual, and descended to breakfast.

Beside her plate lay a letter, which was pretty closely eyed by the Ianson family, as their inmate's correspondence had always been remarkably small.

“A black edge and seal. No bad news, I hope, my dear Miss Bowen?” said the Doctor's wife, sympathetically.

Agatha did not fear. Alas! in the whole

wide world she had not a relative to lose ! And, glancing at the rather peculiar hand, she recognised it at once. She remembered likewise, to account for the black seal, that one of the Miss Harpers had died within the year. So whether from the spice of malice in her composition she wished to disappoint the polite inquisitiveness of the Iansons, or whether from more generous reasons of her own, Miss Bowen left her letter unopened until the meal was done ; when, carelessly taking it up, she adjourned to her own sitting-room.

There was not the slightest necessity for any such precaution, as the missive contained merely these lines.

“ In my letter of yesterday—which I doubt not you have received, since I posted it myself—I omitted to say that not even my brother is aware of it, or of its purport ; as I rarely inform any one of my own private

affairs. Though, of course, I presume not to lay the same restriction on you. God bless you !”

The “God bless you” was added hastily in less neat writing, as if the letter had been broken open to do it. The signature was merely his initials, “N. L. H.,” and the date “Kingcombe Holm,” which Agatha supposed was his father’s house in Dorsetshire.

Then even there, amidst his dear home circle, he had thought of her ! Agatha was more moved by that trifling circumstance, and by the self-restraint and silence that accompanied it, than she would have been by a whole quire of ordinary love-letters.

He did not write again during seven entire days, and while this pause lasted she had time to think much and deeply. She ceased to play and talk confidentially with Tittens, and felt herself growing into a woman fast. Great mental changes may at times be wrought in

one week, especially when it happens to be one of those not infrequent July weeks, which seem as if the sky were bent upon raining out at once the tears of the whole summer.

On the Friday evening, when Miss Bowen, heartily tired of her weather-bound imprisonment, stood at the dining-room window, looking out on a hazy, yellow glow that began to appear in the west, sparkled on the drenched trees of the square, and made little bright reflections on the rain-pools of the pavement,—there appeared a gentleman from the house round the corner, carefully picking his steps by the crossing, and finally landing at Doctor Ianson's door. It was Major Harper.

Agatha instinctively quitted the window, but on second thoughts returned thither, and when he chanced to look up, composedly bowed.

He was come to spend the evening as usual, and she must meet him as usual too, otherwise he might think—supposing he had

not yet seen Emma Thornycroft, or even if he had, he might think—what made Agatha's cheek burn like fire. But she controlled herself. The first vehemence of her pride and anger was over now. She had discovered that the dawning inclination on which she had bestowed a few dreamings and sighings, trying, in foolish girlish fashion, to fan a chance tinder-spark into the holy altar-fire of a woman's first love—had gone out in darkness, and that her free heart lay quiet, in a sort of twilight shade, waiting for its destiny.

Nor for the last few days had she even thought of Nathanael. His silence had as yet no power to grieve or surprise her; if it struck her at all, it was with the hope that perhaps his wooing might die out of itself, and save her the trouble of a painful refusal. She had begun to think—what girls of nineteen are very slow to comprehend—that there

might be other things in the world besides love and its ideal dreams. She had read more than usual—some sensible prose, some lofty-hearted poetry; and was, possibly, “a sadder and a wiser” girl than she had been that day week.

In this changed mood, after a little burst of well-controlled temper, a scornful pang, and a slight trepidation of the heart, Miss Agatha Bowen walked up-stairs to the drawing-room to meet Major Harper.

Her manner in so doing was most commendable, and a worthy example to those young ladies who have to extinguish the tiny embers of a month or two's idle fancy, created by an impressible nature, by girlhood's frantic longing after unseen mysteries, and by the terrible misfortune of having nothing to do. But Miss Bowen's demeanour, so highly creditable, cannot be set forward in words, as hers



consisted in the very simplest, mildest, and politest "How d'ye do."

Major Harper met her with his accustomed pleasantly tender air, until gradually he recollected himself, looked pensive, and subsided into coldness. It was evident to Agatha that he could not have had any communication from Mrs. Thornycroft. She was growing vexed again, alternating from womanly wrath to childish pettishness—for in her heart of hearts she had a deep and friendly regard for the noble half of her guardian's character—when suddenly she decided that it was wisest to take refuge in indifference and her piano. There she stayed for certainly an hour.

At length, Major Harper came softly into her drawing-room.

"Don't let me disturb you—but, when you have quite finished playing, I should like to say a word to you.—Merely on business," he

added, with a slightly confused manner, unusual to the perfect self-possession of Major Harper.

Agatha sat down and faced him, so frigidly, that he seemed to withdraw from the range of her eyes. "You do not often converse with me on business."

He drew back. "That is true. But I considered that with so young a lady as yourself it was needless.—And I hate all business," he added, imperatively.

"Then I regret that my father burdened you with mine."

"No burden; it is a pleasure—if by any means I can be of use to you. Believe me, my dear Miss Bowen, your advantage, your security, is my chief aim. And therefore, in this investment, of which I think it right to inform you——"

"Investment?" she repeated, turning round a childish puzzled face. "Oh, Major Harper,

you know I am quite ignorant of these things. Do let us talk of something else."

"With all my heart," he responded, evidently much relieved, and turned the somewhat awkward conversation to the first available topic, which chanced to be his brother Nathanael.

"You cannot think how much I miss him in my rooms, even though he was such a short time with me. An excellent lad is N. L., and I hear they are making so much of him in Dorsetshire. They tell me he will certainly stay there the whole three months of his leave."

"Oh, indeed!" observed Agatha, briefly. She hardly knew whether to be pleased or sorry at this news, or by doubting it to take a feminine pride in being so much better informed on the subject than the Harper family.

"No wonder he is so happy," continued

the Major, with one of his occasional looks of momentary, though real sadness. "Fifteen years is a long time to be away. Though, I fear, I myself have been almost as long without seeing the whole family together."

"Are they all together now?"—Agatha felt an irresistible desire to ask questions.

"I believe so; at least my father and my three unmarried sisters. Old bachelors and old maids are plentiful in the Harper family. We are all stiff-necked animals; we eschew even gilded harness."

Agatha's cheek glowed with anger at this supposed benevolent warning to herself.

"I dare say your sisters are very happy, nevertheless; marriage is not always a 'holy estate,' " said she, carelessly. "But there was some other Dorsetshire lady whom Mr. Harper told me of. Who is Anne Valery?"

Major Frederick Harper actually started,

and the deep sensitive colour, which not even his forty years and his long worldly experience could quite keep down, rose in his handsome face.

“So N. L. spoke to you of her. No wonder. She is an—an excellent person.”

“An excellent person,” repeated Agatha, mischievously. “Then she is rather elderly, I conclude?”

“Elderly—Anne Valery elderly! By Heavens, no!” (And the excited Major used the solitary asseveration which clung to him, the last trace of his brief military experience.) “Anne Valery old! Not a day older than myself! We were companions as boy and girl, young man and young woman, until—stay—ten—fifteen years ago. Fifteen years!—ah, yes—I suppose she would be considered elderly now.”

After this burst, Major Harper sank into one of his cloudy moods. At last he said,

in a confidential and rather sentimental tone,

“Miss Valery is an excellent lady—an old friend of our family; but she and I have not met for many years. Circumstances necessitated our parting.”

“Circumstances!”

Agatha guessed the truth—or fancied she did; and her wrathful pride was up again. More trophies of the illustrious Frederick’s unwilling slaughters—more heart’s blood dyeing the wheels of this unconscious Juggernaut of female devotees! Yet there he sat, looking so pathetically regretful, as if he felt himself the blameless, helpless instrument of fate to work the sentimental woe of all womankind! Agatha was absolutely dumb with indignation.

She was a little unjust, even were he erring. It is often a great misfortune, but it is no blame to a good man that good women—more than one—have loved him; if, as all

noble men do, he hides the humiliation or sorrow of their love sacredly in his own heart, and makes no boast of it. Of this nobility of character, rare indeed, yet not unknown or impossible—Frederick Harper just fell short. Kind, clever, and amusing he might be, but he was a man not sufficiently great to be humble.

No more was said on the mysterious topic of Miss Anne Valery. Agatha was too angry; and the subject seemed painful to Major Harper. Though he did what was not his habit—especially with female friends—he endeavoured, instead of encouraging, to throw off his momentary sentimentality, and become his usual witty, cheerful, agreeable self.

Miss Bowen, even in her tenderest inclinings towards her guardian, had at times thought him a little too talkative—a little too much of the brilliant man of the world. Now, in her bitterness against him, his gaiety

was positively offensive to her. She rose, and proposed that they should quit her own private room for the general drawing-room of the family.

The Iansons were all there, even the Doctor being prone to linger in his dull home for the pleasure of Major Harper's delightful company. There was another, too, the unexpected sight of whom made both Agatha and her companion start.

As she and the Major entered, there arose almost like an apparition from his seat in the window-recess—the tall, slight figure of Nathanael.

“N. L. ! Where on earth have you dropped from ? What a *very* extraordinary fellow you are !” cried the elder brother.

“Perhaps unwelcome also !” said the quiet voice.

“Unwelcome—never, my dear boy ! Only next time, do be a little more confidential.



Here have I been telling a whole string of apparent fibs about your movements—have I not, Miss Bowen? Do you not consider this brother of mine the most eccentric creature in the world?”

Agatha looked up, and met the young man's eyes. Their expression could not be mistaken; they were *lover's eyes*—such as never in her life she had met before. They seemed constraining her to do what out of pity or mechanical impulse she at once did—silently to hold out her hand.

Nathanael took it with his usual manner. There was no other greeting on his part or hers. Immediately afterwards he slipped away to the very farthest corner of the room.

It would be hard to say whether Agatha felt relieved or disappointed at his behaviour; but surprised she most certainly was. This was not the sort of “lover's meeting” of girlish imaginings; nor was he the sort of

lover, so perfectly unobtrusive, self-restrained, and coldly calm. She was glad she had not been at the pains to write the romantically-pitiful, tender refusal, which she had concocted sentence by sentence in her deeply-touched heart, during that first wakeful night. He did not seem half miserable enough to need such wondrous compassion.

Freed in measure from constraint, she became her own natural self, as women rarely indeed never are in the presence of those they love, or of those by whom they believe themselves loved. Neither unpleasant consciousness rested heavily on Agatha now ; her demeanour was therefore very sweet, candid, and altogether pleasing.

Major Harper even forgot his benevolent precautions on Miss Bowen's account, and tried to render himself as agreeable as heretofore, talking away at a tremendous rate, and with most admirable eloquence, while his

brother sat silent in a corner. The contrast between them was never so strong. But once or twice Agatha, wearied out with laughing and listening, stole a look towards the figure that she felt was sitting there ; and encountered the only sign Nathanael gave,—the unmistakeable “lover’s eyes.” They seemed to pierce into her heart and make it quiver—not exactly with tenderness, but with the strange controlling sense by which the love of a strong nature, reticent, and self-possessed even in its utmost passion—at times appears to enfold a woman. And any true affection, whether of lover or friend, to those who have never known it and are unconsciously pining for lack of it, comes at first like water in a thirsty land.

Miss Bowen’s frank gaiety died slowly away, and she fell into more than one long reverie, which did not escape the benign notice of her guardian. He grew serious, and

made an attempt to remove from her his own dangerous proximity.

“Come, N. L., it is time we vanished. You have never told me the least fragment of news from home—that is, from Kingcombe.”

“You were too much engaged, brother. But we have plenty of time.”

“Kingcombe; is that the place your father lives at?” said Mrs. Ianson, who took a patronising interest in the young man. “What a pretty name! Were you aware of it, Miss Bowen?”

Agatha, for her life, could not help changing colour as she answered “Yes,” knowing perfectly well who was watching her the while, and that he and she were thinking of the same thing, namely, the brief note whose date was her only information as to the family residence of the Harpers.

“Kingcombe is as pretty as its name,” ob-

served the elder brother.—“A name more peculiar than at first seems. It was given by a loyal Harper during the Protectorate. It had been St. Mary's Abbey, but he with pretended sanctimoniousness changed the name, and called it *Kingcombe Holm*; as a gentle hint from the Dorsetshire coast to Prince Charles over the water. Ah! a clever fellow was my great great grandfather, Geoffrey Harper!”

All laughed at the anecdote, and the Iansons looked with additional respect on the man who thus carelessly counted his grandfathers up to the Commonwealth. But Mrs. Ianson's curiosity penetrated even to the Harpers of Queen Victoria's day.

“I am sure we can't let you two gentlemen away so early. If you have family matters to talk over, suppose we send you for half an hour to Miss Bowen's drawing-room; or, if they are not secrets, pray discuss them

here. I am sure we are all greatly interested; are we not, Miss Bowen?"

Agatha made some unintelligible answer. She thought Nathanael's quick eyes darted from her to Mrs. Ianson and back again, as if to judge whether, young-lady-like, she had told his secret to all her female friends. But there was something in Agatha's countenance which marked her out as that rare character, a woman who can hold her tongue—even in a love affair.

After a minute she looked at Mr. Harper gravely, kindly, as if to say, "You need not fear—I have not betrayed you;" and meeting her candid eyes, his suspicions vanished. He drew nearer to the circle, and began to talk.

"Mrs. Ianson is very kind, but we need not hold any such solemn conclave, Frederick," said he, smiling. "All the news that I did not unfold in my letter of yesterday, I

can tell you now. I would like every one here to be interested in our good sisters and in all at home."

"Yes—oh, yes," responded the other, mechanically. "Any messages for me?"

"My father says he hopes to see you this autumn at Kingcombe. He is growing an old man now."

"Ah, indeed!—An admirable man is my father, Miss Bowen. Quite a gentleman of the old school; but peculiar—rather peculiar. Well, what else, Nathanael?"

"Elizabeth, since Emily's death, seems to have longed after you very much.—You were the next eldest, you know, and she fancies you were always very like Emily. She says it is so long since you have been to Kingcombe."

"It is such a dull place. Besides, I have seen them all elsewhere occasionally."

"All but Elizabeth; and you know, unless

you go to Kingcombe, you never can see Elizabeth," said the younger brother, gently.

"That is true!—Poor dear soul!" Frederick answered, looking grave. "Well, I will go ere long."

"Perhaps at Eulalie's wedding, which I told you of?"

"True—true. Eulalie is the youngest Miss Harper, as we should explain to our kind friends here—whom I hope we are not boring very much with our family reminiscences. And Eulalie, contrary to the usual custom of the Harpers, is actually going to be married. To a clergyman, is he not, N. L.?—Late curate of Kingcombe parish?"

"No—of Anne Valery's parish. By the way, you have not yet asked a single question about Anne Valery."

The Major's aspect visibly changed. In all the years of his acquaintance with the world he had not yet learnt the convenient art of



being a physiognomical hypocrite. "Well, never mind—I ask a dozen questions now. How could I forget so excellent a friend of the family?"

"She is, indeed," said Nathanael, earnestly, while a glow of pleasure or enthusiasm dyed his pale features, and he even ceased his close watch over Agatha. "Though I was such a boy when I left, I find I have kept a true memory of Anne Valery. She is just the woman I always pictured her, from my own remembrance, and from Uncle Brian's chance allusions; though, in general, it was little enough he said of England or home. I was quite surprised to hear from Elizabeth what a strong friendship used to exist between Uncle Brian, yourself, and Anne Valery."

Major Harper's restlessness increased. "Really, we are indulging our friends with our whole genealogy—uncles, aunts, and col-

lateral branches included—which cannot be very interesting to Mrs. and Miss Ianson, or even to Miss Bowen, however kindly she may be disposed towards the Harper family.”

The Iansons here made polite disclaimers, but Agatha said nothing. Immediately afterwards, Nathanael's conversation likewise ebbed into silence.

The next time Agatha heard him speak was in answer to a sudden question of his brother's, as to what had made him return to London so unexpectedly? “I thought you would have stayed at least three months.”

“No,” he said, in a low tone, “by that time I shall be far enough away.”

“Why so?”

“From circumstances which have lately arisen”—he did not look at Agatha, but she felt his meaning—“I fear I must return to America at once.”

He said no more, for his brother asked no more questions. But the tidings jarred painfully on Agatha's mind.

He was then going away, this man of so gentle, true, and noble nature—this, the only man who loved her, and whom, while she thought of rejecting, she had still hoped to retain as an honoured and dear friend. He was going away, and she might never see him more. She felt grieved, and her lonely, unloved position rose up before her in more bitterness and more fear than it was wont to do. She became as thoughtful and silent as Nathanael himself.

Mr. Harper never attempted to address her or attract her attention during all that strange, long evening, which comprised in itself so many slight circumstances, so many conflicting states of feeling. Almost the only word this very eccentric lover said to her was

in a whisper, just as his hand touched hers in bidding good-by.

“As I am leaving England so soon, may I come here again to-morrow?”

“No, not to-morrow;” and then, her kind heart repenting of the evident pain she gave, she added, “Well, the day after to-morrow, if you like. But——”

Whatever that forbidding “but” was meant to hint, Nathanael did not stay to hear. He was gone in a moment.

However, that night a chance word of Mrs. Ianson's did more for the suit of the unloved, or only half-loved lover, than he himself ever dreamed of.

“Well,” said that lady, with sly, matronly smile, as, showing more attention than usual, she lighted Agatha's candle for bed—“well, my dear Miss Bowen, is the wedding to be at my house?”

“What wedding?”

“Oh, you know; you know! I have guessed it a long while, but to-night—surely, I may congratulate you? Never was there a more charming man than Major Harper.”

Agatha looked furious. “Has he then”—“told you the lie he told to Emma”—she was about to say, but luckily checked herself. “Has he then been so premature as to say we were engaged?”

“No! oh, of course not. But the thing is as plain as light.”

“You are mistaken, Mrs. Ianson. He is one of my very kindest friends; but I have never had the slightest intention of marrying Major Harper.”

With that she took her candle, and walked slowly to her own room. There, with her door locked, though that was needless, since there was no welcome or unwelcome friendship likely to intrude on her utter solitude,—she

gave way to a woman's wounded pride. Added to this, was the terror that seizes a helpless young creature, who, all supports taken away, is at last set face to face with the cruel world, without even the steadfastness given by a strong sorrow. If she had really loved Frederick Harper, perhaps her condition would have been more endurable than now.

At length, above the storm of passion there seemed floating a small still voice, just as if the spirit of him who she knew was always thinking of her, then spoke to her spirit, with the wondrous communication that has often happened in dreams, or waking, between two, one of whom intensely loved. A communication which appears both possible and credible to those who have felt any strong human attachment, especially that one which for the sake of its object seems able to cross the bounds of distance, time, life, or eternity.

It was a thing that neither then or after-

wards could she ever account for, and years elapsed before she mentioned the circumstance to any one. But while she lay weeping across her bed, Agatha seemed to hear distinctly, just as if it had been a voice gliding past the window, half-mixing with the wind that was then rising, the words:

*“ I love you ! No man will ever love you like me.”*

That night, before she slept, her determination was taken.

## CHAPTER V.

NEXT morning Miss Bowen astonished every one, and excited once more Mrs. Ianson's incredulous smile, by openly desiring the servant who waited to take a message for her to Major Harper's. It was to the effect that she wished immediately to see that gentleman, could he make it convenient to visit her.

The message was given by her very distinctly, and with most creditable calmness, considering that the destinies of her whole life hung on the sentence.

Major Harper appeared, and was shown into Miss Bowen's drawing-room. She was



not there, and the Major waited rather uneasily for several minutes, unaware that half of that time she had been standing without, her hand on the lock of the door. But her tremulousness was that of natural emotion, not of fluctuating purpose. No physiognomist studying Agatha's mouth and chin would doubt the fact, that though rather slow to will—when she had once willed, scarcely anything had power to shake her resolution.

She went in at last, and bade Major Harper good morning. "I have sent for you," she said, "to talk over a little business."

"Business!"—And the hesitation and discomfort which seemed to arise in him at the mere mention of the word, again were visible in Major Harper.

"Not trust business—something quite different," said Agatha, scarcely able to help smiling at the alarm of her guardian.

“Then anything you like, my dear Miss Bowen ; I have nothing in the world to do to-day. That stupid brother of mine is worse company than none at all. He said he had letters to write to Kingcombe, and vanished up-stairs. The rude fellow ! But he is an excellent fellow too.”

“So you have always said. He appears to love his home, and be much beloved there. Is it so ?”

“Most certainly. Already they know him better than they do me, and care for him more ; though he has been away for fifteen years. But then he has kept up a constant correspondence with them ; while I, tossing about in the world—ah ! I have had a hard life, Miss Bowen !”

He looked so sad, that Agatha felt sorry for him. But his melancholy moods had less power to touch her than of old. His gaiety so quickly and invariably returned, that her

belief in the reality of his grief was somewhat shaken.

She paused a little, and then recurred again, indifferently as it were, to Nathanael—the one person in his family of whom Major Harper always spoke gladly and warmly.

“You seem to have a great love for your younger brother. Is he then so noble a character?”

“What do you call a noble character, my dear young lady?”

The half-jesting, half-patronising manner irritated Agatha; but she answered boldly:

“A man honest in his principles, faithful to his word; just, generous, and honourable.”

“What a category of qualities! How interested young ladies are in a pale, thin boy! Well then”—seeing that Agatha looked serious—“well then, I declare to Heaven that, even according to your high-flown definitions, he is as noble a lad as ever breathed. I

can find no fault in him, except that, as I said, he is such a mere boy. Are you satisfied? Did you want to try if I were indeed a heartless, unbrotherly, good-for-nothing fellow, as you appear to think me sometimes?"

"No," said Agatha briefly, noticing with something like scorn the Major's instinctive assumption that her questions must have some near or remote reference to himself, while he never once guessed their real motive. That answered, she changed the conversation.

After half an hour's chat, Major Harper delicately alluded to the supposed business on which she had wished to see him, though in a tone that showed him to be rather doubtful whether it existed at all.

Agatha coloured, and her heart quailed a little, as any girl's would, in having to speak so openly of things which usually reach young maidens softly murmured amidst the confes-

sions of first love, or revealed by tender parents with blessings and tears. Life's earliest and best romance came to her with all its bloom worn away—all its sacredness and mystery set aside. For a moment she felt this hard.

"I wished to inform you of something nearly concerning me, which, as the guardian appointed by my father, it is right you should know. I have had"—here she tried to make her lips say the words without faltering—"I have had an offer of marriage."

"God bless my soul!" stammered out Major Harper, completely thrown off his guard by surprise. A very awkward pause ensued, until, his natural good feeling conquering any other, he said, not without emotion, "The fact of your consulting me shows that this offer is—is not without interest to you. May I ask—is it likely—that I shall have to congratulate you?"

“Yes.”

He rose up slowly, and walked to the window. Whether his sensations were merely those of wounded vanity, or whether he had liked her better than he himself acknowledged, certain it was that Major Frederick Harper was a good deal moved—so much so, that he succeeded in concealing it. He came back, very kind, subdued, and tender, sat down by her side, and took her hand.

“You will not wonder that I am somewhat surprised—nay, affected—by these sudden tidings, viewing you as I have always done in the light of a—younger sister—or—or a daughter. Your happiness must naturally be very dear to me.”

“Thank you,” murmured Agatha; and the tears came into her eyes. She felt that she had been somewhat harsh to him; but she felt, too, with great thankfulness, that despite

this softening compunction, her heart was free and firm. She had great liking, but no *love*, for Major Harper.

“I trust the—the gentleman you allude to, is likely to make you happy?”

“Yes,” returned Agatha, for she could only speak in monosyllables.

“Is he—as your friend and guardian I may ask that question—is he of good standing in the world, and in a position to maintain you comfortably?”

“I do not know—I have never thought about that,” she cried, restlessly. “All I know is, that he loves me—that I honour him—that he would take me——” “out of this misery,” she was about to say, but stopped, feeling that both the thought and its expression were unworthy Nathanael’s future wife, and unfit to be heard by Nathanael’s brother.

“That he would take me,” repeated she,

firmly, "into a contented and happy home, where I should be made a better woman than I am, and live a life more worthy of myself and of him."

"You must then esteem him very highly?"

"I do—more than any man I ever knew."

The Major winced slightly, but quickly recovered himself. "That is, I believe, the feeling with which every woman ought to marry. He who wins and deserves such an attachment is"—and he sighed—"is a happy man!—Happier, perhaps, than those who have remained single."

Again there ensued a pause, until Major Harper broke it by saying:

"There is one more question—the last of all—which, after the confidence you have shown me, I may venture to ask: do I know this gentleman?"

Agatha replied by putting into his hands his brother's letter.



The moment she had done so she felt remorse for having betrayed her lover's confidence by letting any eyes save her own rest on his tender words. Had she loved him as he her, she could not have done so ; and even now a painful sensation smote her. But it was too late.

Major Harper's eyes had merely skimmed down the page to the signature, when he threw it from him, crying out vehemently :

“Impossible ! Agatha marry Nathanael—Nathanael marry Agatha !—He is a boy, a very child ! What can he be thinking of ? Send his letter back—tell him it is utter nonsense ! Upon my soul it is !”

Major Harper was very shortsighted and inconsiderate when he gave way to this burst of vexation before any woman—still more before such a woman as Agatha.

She let him go on without interruption,

but she lifted the letter from the floor, refolded it, and held it tenderly—more tenderly than she had ever until now felt towards it or its writer. Something of the grave sweetness belonging to the tie of an affianced wife began to cast its shadow over her heart.

“Major Harper, when you have quite done speaking, perhaps you will sit down and hear what I have to say.”

Struck by her manner, he obeyed, entreating her pardon likewise, for he was a true gentleman, and felt that he had acted very wrong.

“But surely,” he began—until, looking at her, something convinced him that his arguments were useless. He stretched out his hand again for the letter, but with a slight gesture which expressed much, Agatha withheld it. After a pause, he said, meekly enough, as if thoroughly overcome by cir-

cumstances,—“So, it is quite true? You really love my brother?”

“I honour him, as I said, more than I do any man.”

“And love him—are you sure you love him?”

“No one,” she answered, deeply blushing — “no one but himself has a right to receive the answer to that question.”

“True, true. Pardon me once more. But I am so startled, absolutely shocked. My brother Nathanael—he that was a baby when I was a grown man—he to marry—marrying you too—and I—— Well; I suppose I am really growing into a miserable, useless old bachelor. I have thrown away my life; I shall be the last apple left on the tree—and a tolerably withered one too. But no matter. The world shall see the sunny half of me to the last.”

He laughed rather tunelessly at his own

bitter jest, and after a brief silence, recovered his accustomed manner.

“ Well, such things must be, and I, though a bachelor myself, have no right to forbid marriages. Allow me to congratulate you. Of course you have answered this letter? My brother knows his happiness?”

“ He knows nothing ; but I wished that he should do so to-day, after I had spoken to you. It was a respect I felt to be your due, to form no engagement of this kind without your knowledge.”

“ Thank you,” he said, in a low voice.

“ You have been good and kind to me,” continued Agatha, a little touched, “ and I wish to have your approval in all things—chiefly in this. Is it so ?”

He offered his hand, saying, “ God bless you,” with a quivering lip. He even muttered “ my child ;” as though he felt how old he was growing, and how he had let all life’s

happiness slip by, until it was just that he should no longer claim it, but be content to see young people rejoicing in their youth. After a pause, he added, "Now, shall I go and fetch my brother?"

"No," replied Agatha, "send for him, and do you stay here."

"As you please," said Major Harper, a good deal surprised at this very original way of conducting a love affair. After courteously offering to withdraw himself to the dining-room, which Agatha declined, he sat and waited with her during the few minutes that elapsed before his brother appeared.

Nathanael looked much agitated; his boyish face seemed to have grown years older since the preceding night. He paused at the door, and glanced with suspicion on his brother and Miss Bowen.

"You sent for me, Frederick?"

"It was I who sent for you," said Agatha.

And then, steadfastly regarding him whom she had tacitly accepted as her husband, the guide and ruler of her whole life—her self-possession failed. A great timidity, almost amounting to terror, came over her. Vaguely she felt the want of something unknown—something which in the whirl of her destiny she could grasp and hold by, sure that she held fast to the right. It was the one emotion, neither regard, liking, honour, or esteem, yet including and surpassing all—the *love*, strong, pure love, without which it is so dangerous, often so fatal, for a woman to marry.

Agatha, never having known this feeling, could scarcely be said to have sacrificed it; at least not consciously. But even while she believed she was doing right in accepting the man who loved her, and whom she could make so happy, she trembled.

Major Harper sat looking out of the window in an uncomfortable silence, which he evi-

dently knew not how to break. It was a very awkward and somewhat ridiculous position for all three.

Nathanael was the first to rise out of it. Slowly his features settled into composure, and the strong, earnest purpose of his soul gave him both dignity and calmness, even though all hope had evidently died. He looked steadily at his brother, avoiding Agatha.

“Frederick, I think I understand now. She has been telling you all.”

“It was right she should. Her father left her in my care. She wishes you to learn her decision in my presence,” said Major Harper, unwittingly taking a new and even respectful tone to the younger brother, whom he was wont to call “that boy.”

Nathanael grasped with his slight, long fingers the chair by which he stood. “As she pleases. I am quite ready. Still—if—

yesterday—without telling you or any one—she had said—— But I am quite ready to hear what she decides.”

Despite his firmness, the words were uttered slowly and with a great struggle.

“ Tell him everything, Miss Bowen; it will come better from yourself,” said Frederick Harper, rising.

Agatha rose likewise, walked across the room, and laid her hand in that of him who loved her. The only words she said were so low that he alone could hear them:

“ I have been very desolate—be kind to me !”

Nathanael made no answer; indeed for the moment his look was that of a man bewildered—but he never forgot those words.

Agatha felt her hand clasped—softly—but with a firm grasp that seemed to bind it his for ever. This was the only sign of betrothal that passed between them. In another



minute or two, unable to bear the scene longer, she crept out of the room and walked up-stairs, feeling with a dizzy sense, half of comfort, half of fear—yet, on the whole, the comfort stronger than the fear—that the struggle was all over, and her fate sealed for life.

When she descended, an hour after, the Harpers had gone; but she found a little note awaiting her, just one line :

“ If not forbidden, I may come this evening?”

Agatha knew she had no right to forbid even had she wished it, now. So she waited quietly through the long, dim, misty day—which seemed the strangest day she had ever known; until, in the evening, her lover's knock came to the door.

She was sitting with Jane Ianson, near whom, partly in shy fear, partly from a vague desire for womanly sympathy, she had

closely kept for the last hour. As yet, the Iansons knew nothing. She wondered, whether from his manner or hers they would be likely to guess what had passed that morning between herself and Mr. Harper?

It was an infinite relief to her when following, nay preceding Nathanael, there appeared his elder brother, with the old pleasant smile and bow.

But amidst all his assumed manner, Major Harper took occasion to whisper kindly to Agatha; "My brother made me come—I shall do admirably to talk nonsense to the Iansons."

And so he did, carrying off the restraint of the evening so ingeniously that no one would have suspected any deeper elements of joy or pain beneath the smooth surface of their cheerful group.

Nathanael sat almost as silent as ever; but even his very silence was a beautiful,

joyful repose. In his aspect a new soul seemed to have dawned—the new soul, noble and strong, which comes into a man when he feels that his life has another life added to it, to guard, cherish, and keep as his own until death. And though Mr. Harper gave little outward sign of what was in him, it was touching to see how his eyes followed his betrothed everywhere, whether she were moving about the room, or working, or trying to sing. Continually Agatha felt the shining of these quiet, tender eyes, and she began to experience the consciousness—perhaps the sweetest in the world—of being able to make another human being entirely happy.

Only sometimes, when she looked at her future husband—hardly able to believe he was really such—and thought how strangely things had happened, how here she was, no longer a girl but a woman engaged to be

married, sitting calmly by her lover's side, without any of the tremblingly delicious emotions which she had once believed would constitute the great mystery, Love—a strange pensiveness overtook her. She felt all the solemnity of her position, and as yet little of its sweetness. Perhaps that would come in time. She resolved to do her duty towards him whom she so tenderly honoured, and who so deeply loved herself; and all evening the entire gentleness of her behaviour was enough to steal the very soul out of any one who held towards her the relation now borne by Nathanael Harper.

At length, even the good-natured elder brother's flow of conversation seemed to fail, and he gave hints about leaving, to which the younger tacitly consented. Agatha bade them both good night in public, and crept

away, as she thought unobserved, to her own sitting-room.

There she stood before the hearth, which looked cheerful enough this wet July night,—the fire-light shining on her hands, as they hung down listlessly folded together. She was thinking how strange everything seemed about her, and what a change had come in a few days—nay, hours.

Suddenly, a light touch was laid on her shoulder. It startled her, but she did not attempt to shake it off. She knew quite well whose hand it was, and that it had a right to be there.

“Agatha!”

She half turned, put her fingers gently in his, and said once more “Good night.”

“Good night, *my* Agatha.”

And for a minute he stood, holding her hand by the fire-light, until some one below

called out loudly for "Mr. Harper." Then a kiss, soft and timid as a woman's, trembled over Agatha's mouth, and he was gone.

This was the first time she had ever been kissed by any man. The feeling it left was very new, tremulous, and strange.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning was Sunday. Under one of the dark arches in Bloomsbury Church—with Mrs. Ianson's large feathers tossing on one side and Jane's sickly unhappy face at the other—Agatha said her prayers in due dominical form. "Said her prayers" is the right phrase, for trouble had not yet opened her young heart to pray. Yet she was a good girl, not wilfully undevout; and if during the long missionary-sermon she secretly got her prayer-book and read—what was the most likely portion to attract her—the marriage service, it was with feelings solem-

nised and not unsacred. Some portions of it made her very thoughtful, so thoughtful that when suddenly startled by the conclusion of the sermon, she prayed—not with the clergyman, for “Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Heretics”—but for two young creatures, herself and another, who perhaps needed Heaven’s merciful blessings quite as much.

When she rose up, it was with moist eyelashes; and then she perceived what until this minute she had not seen,—that close behind her, sitting where he had probably sat all church-time, was Nathanael Harper.

If anything can touch the heart of a generous woman, when it is still a free heart, it is that quiet, unobtrusive, proudly-silent love which, giving all, exacts nothing. Agatha’s smile had in it something even of shy tenderness, when at the church-door she was met by Mr. Harper. And when, after speaking courteously to the Iansons, he came, quite



naturally as it were, to her side, and drew her arm in his, she felt a strange sense of calm and rest in knowing that she leant on her betrothed husband.

At the door he seemed wishful enough to enter ; but Mrs. Ianson invariably looked very coldly upon Sunday visitors. And something questioning and questionable in the glances of both that lady and her daughter was very painful to Miss Bowen.

“Not to-day,” she whispered, as her lover detained her hand. “To-morrow I shall have made all clear to the Iansons.”

“As you will! Nothing shall trouble you,” said he, with a gentle acquiescence, the value of which, alas ! she did not half appreciate. “Only remember, I have so few to-morrows.”

This speech troubled Agatha for many minutes, bringing various thoughts concerning the dim future which as yet she had

scarcely contemplated. It is wonderful how little an unsophisticated girl's mind rests on the common-sense and common-place of marriage,—household prospects, income, long or short engagements, and the like. When in the course of that drowsy, dark Sunday afternoon, with the rain-drops dripping heavily on the balcony, she took opportunity formally to communicate her secret to the astonished Mrs. Ianson, Agatha was perfectly confounded by the two simple questions: “When are you to be married? And where are you going to live?”

“And oh! my dear,” cried the Doctor's wife, roused into positive sympathy by a confidence which always touches the softest chord in every woman's heart—“oh, my dear, I hope it will not be a long engagement. People change so—at least men do. You don't know what misery comes out of long engagements!” And, lowering her voice, she turned her dull

grey eyes, swimming with motherly<sup>s</sup> tears, towards the corner sofa where the pale, fretful, old-maidish Jane lay sleeping.

Agatha understood a little, and guessed more. After that day, however ill-tempered and disagreeable the invalid might be, she was always very patient and kind towards Jane Ianson.

After tea, when her daughter was gone to bed, Mrs. Ianson unfolded all to the Doctor, who nearly broke Miss Bowen's fingers with his congratulatory shake; John the footman, catching fragments of talk, probably put the whole story together for the amusement of the lower regions; and when Agatha retired to rest she was quite sure that the whole house, down to the little maid who waited on herself, was fully aware of the important fact that Miss Bowen was going to be married to Mr. Locke Harper.

This annoyed her—she had not expected

it. But she bore it stoically as a necessary evil. Only sometimes she thought how different all things were, seen afar and near ; and faintly sighed for that long ago lost picture of wakening fancy—the Arcadian, impossible love-dream.

She sat up till after midnight, writing to Emma Thornycroft, the only near friend to whom she had to write, the news of her engagement — information that for many reasons she preferred giving by pen not words. Finishing, she put her blind aside to have one freshening look at the trees in the square. It was quite cloudless now, the moon being just rising—the same moon that Agatha had seen, as a bright slender line appearing at street-corners, on the Midsummer-night when she and Nathanael Harper walked home together. She felt a deep interest in that especial moon, which seemed between its dawning and

waning to have comprised the whole fate of her life.

Quietly opening the window, she leant out gazing at the moonlight, as foolish girls will—yet who does not remember, half pathetically, those dear old follies!

“Heigho! I wonder what will be the end of it all!” said Agatha Bowen; without specifying what the pronoun “it” alluded to.

But she stopped, hearing a footstep rather policeman-like passing up and down the railing under the trees. And as after a while he crossed the street—she saw that the “policeman” had the very unprofessional appearance of a cloak and long fair hair:—Agatha’s cheek burned; she shut down the window and blind, and re-lighted the candle. But her heart beat fast—it was so strange, so new to be the object of such love. “However, I suppose I shall get used to it—besides—oh, how good he is!”

And the genuine reverence of her heart conquered its touch of feminine vanity ; which, perhaps, had he known, Nathanael would have done wiser in going to bed like a Christian, than in wandering like a heathen idolater round his beloved's shrine. But however her pride may have been flattered, it is certain that Agatha went to sleep with tears, innocent and tender enough to serve as mirrors for watching night-angels, lying on her cheek.

The next morning she waited at home, and for the first time received her betrothed openly as such. She was sitting alone in her little drawing-room engaged at her work ; but put it down when Mr. Harper entered, and held out her hand kindly, though with a slight restraint and confusion. Both were needless : he only touched this lately-won hand with his soft boyish lips—like a *preux chevalier* of the olden time—and sat down

by her side. However deep his love might be, its reserve was unquestionable.

After a while he began to talk to her—timidly yet tenderly, as friend with friend—watching her fingers while they moved, until at length the girl grew calmed by the calmness of her young lover. So much so, that she even forgot he was a young man and her lover, and found herself often steadfastly looking up into his face, which was gradually melting into a known likeness, as many faces do when we grow familiar with them. Agatha puzzled herself much as to who it could be that Mr. Harper was like—though she found no nearer resemblance than a head she had once seen of the angel Gabriel.

She told him this—quite innocently, and then recollecting herself, coloured deeply. But Nathanael looked perfectly happy.

“The likeness is very flattering,” said he,

smiling. "Yet I would only wish to be—what you called me once, the first evening I saw you. Do you remember?"

"No."

"Ah — well — it was not probable you should," he answered, as if patiently taking upon himself the knowledge which only a strong love can bear—that it is *alone* in its strength. "It was merely when they were talking of my name, and you said I looked like a Nathanael. Now, do you remember?"

"Yes, and I think so still," she replied, without any false shame. "I never look at you, but I feel there is 'no guile' in you, Mr. Harper."

"Thanks," he said, with much feeling. "Thanks—except for the last word. How soon will you try to say 'Nathanael?'"

A fit of wilfulness or shyness was upon Agatha. She drew away her hand which he had taken. "How soon? Nay, I cannot



tell. It is a long name, old-fashioned, and rather ugly."

He made no answer—scarcely even showed that he was hurt; but he never again asked her to call him "Nathanael."

She went on with her work, and he sat quietly looking at her for some little time more. Any Asmodeus peering at them through the roof would have vowed these were the oddest pair of lovers ever seen.

At last, rousing himself, Mr. Harper said: "It is time, Agatha"—he paused, and added—"dear Agatha—quite time that we should talk a little about what concerns our happiness—at least, mine."

She looked at him—saw how earnest he was, and put down her work. The softness of her manner soothed him.

"I know, dear Agatha, that it is very wrong in me; but sometimes I can hardly believe this is all true, and that you really

promised—what I heard from your own lips two days ago. Will you—out of that good heart of yours—say it again?”

“What must I say?”

“That you love—no, I don’t mean that—but that you care for me a little—enough to trust me with your happiness? Do you?”

For all reply, Agatha held out the hand she had drawn back. Her lover kept it tight in that peculiar grasp of his—very soft and still, but firm as adamant.

“Thank you. You shall never regret your trust. My brother told me all you said to him on Saturday morning. I know you do not quite love me yet.”

Agatha started, it was so true.

“Still, as you have loved no one else—you are sure of that?”

She thought a minute, then lifted her candid eyes, and answered:

“Yes, quite sure!”

He, watching her closely, betrayed himself so far as to give an inward thankful sigh.

“Then, Agatha, since I love you, I am not afraid.”

“Nor I,” she answered, and a tear fell, for she was greatly moved. Her betrothed put his arms round her, softly and timidly, as if unfamiliar with actions of tenderness; but she trembled so much that, still softly, he let her go, only keeping firm hold of her hand, apparently to show that no power on earth, gentle or strong, should wrest that from him.

A few minutes after, he began speaking of his affairs, of which Agatha was in a state of entire ignorance. She said, jestingly—for they had fallen into quite familiar jesting now, and were laughing together like a couple of children—that she had not the least idea whether she were about to marry a prince or a beggar.

"No," answered her lover, smiling at her unworldliness, and thereby betraying that innocent as he looked, his was not the innocence of ignorance. "No; but I am not very like a prince, and as a beggar I should certainly be too proud to marry *you*."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Because I understand you are a very rich young lady (I don't know how rich, for I never thought of the subject or inquired about it till to-day), while I am only able to earn my income year by year. Yet it is a good income, and I earnestly hope fully equal to yours."

"I don't know what mine is. But why are you so punctilious?"

"Uncle Brian impressed upon me, from my boyhood, that one of the greatest horrors of life must be the taunt of having married an heiress for her money."

"Has he ever married?"

"No."

"And is he a very old man?" Miss Bowen asked, less interested in money matters than in this Uncle Brian, whose name so constantly floated in meteoric-fashion across his nephew's conversation.

"Fifteen years in the colonies makes a man old before his time. And he was not very young, probably full thirty, when he went out. But I could go on talking of Uncle Brian for ever; you must stop me, Agatha."

"Not I—I like to hear," she answered, beginning to feel how sweet it was to sit talking thus confidentially, and know herself and her words esteemed fair and pleasant in the eyes of one who loved her. But as she looked up and smiled, that same witching smile put an effectual stop to the chronicle of Brian Harper.

"And I have to go back to Canada so soon!" whispered Nathanael to himself, as

his gaze, far less calm than heretofore, fell down like a warm sunshine over his betrothed. "The time of my stay will soon be over, and—what then, Agatha?"

She did not wholly comprehend the question, and so let it pass. She was quite content to keep him talking about things and people in whom her interest was naturally growing; of Kingcombe Holm, the old house on the Dorset coast, where the Harpers had dwelt for centuries; of its present owner, Nathanael Harper, Esquire, who, proud of that venerable name so renowned in Dorsetshire pedigrees, had once refused to merge it even in the blaze of a peerage. Of the five Miss Harpers, of whom one was dead, and another, the all-important "married sister," Mrs. Dugdale, lived in a town close by. Of Eulalie, the pretty *cadette* who was at some future time going to disappear behind the shadows of matrimony; of busy,

housekeeping Mary, whom nobody could possibly do without, and who couldn't be suffered to marry on any account whatever. Last of all, was the eye, ear, and heart of the house, kept tenderly in its inmost nook, from which for twenty years she had never moved, and never would move until softly carried to the house appointed for all living—Elizabeth, the eldest—of whom Nathanael's soft voice grew softer as he spoke. His betrothed did not like to ask many questions about Elizabeth.

The one of whom she had it in her mind always to inquire, and whose name somehow always slipped past, was Miss Anne Valery.

All this conversation—wherein the young lover bore himself much more bravely than in regular “love making”—a manufacture at which he was not *au fait* at all, caused the morning to pass swiftly by. Agatha thought

if all her life were to move so smoothly and pleasantly, she need never repent trusting its current to the guidance of Nathanael Harper. And when, soon after he departed, Emma Thornycroft came in, all smiles, wonderings, and congratulations, Miss Bowen was in a mood cheerful enough to look the happy *fiancée* to the life; besides womanly and tender enough to hang round her friend's neck, testifying her old regard—until Master James testified his also, and likewise his general sympathy in the scene, by flying at them both with bread-and-buttery fingers.

“Ah, Agatha, there is nothing like being a wife and mother! you see what happiness lies before you,” cried the affectionate soul, hugging her unruly son and heir.

Miss Bowen slightly shuddered; being of a rather different opinion; which, however, she had the good taste to keep to herself, since occasionally a slight misgiving



arose that either she was unreasonably harsh, or that the true type of infantile loveableness did not exist in the young Thornycrofts.

As a private penance for possible injustice, and also out of the general sunniness of her contented heart, she was particularly kind to Master James that day, and moreover promised to spend the next at the Botanic Gardens—not the terrific Zoological!—with Emma and the babies.

“And,” added the young matron, with a gracious satisfaction, “you know, my dear, we shall—now and always—be most happy to see Mr. Harper in the evening.”

## CHAPTER VII

WHETHER Mr. Harper, being a rather proud and reserved individual, was not "so happy to be seen in the evening" as an attendant planet openly following his sphered idol, or whether, like all true lovers, he was very jealous over the lightest public betrayal of love's sanctity, most certainly he did not appear until he had been expected for at least two hours. Even then his manner was somewhat constrained. Emma's smiling, half-jesting congratulations were nipped in the bud ; she felt—as she afterwards declared—"quite frightened at him."

Agatha, too, met him rather meekly, fearing lest she had led him into a position distasteful to his feelings. She was relieved when, taking little notice of herself, he fell into conversation with Mr. Thornycroft—a serious discussion on political and general topics. Once or twice, glancing at him, and noticing how well he talked, and how manly and self-possessed he looked, Agatha began to feel proud of her betrothed. She could not have endured a lover who—in not unfrequent lover-like fashion—“made a fool of himself” on her account.

While the two gentlemen still talked, Miss Bowen stood secretly listening, but apparently watching the rich twilight that coloured the long sweep of the Regent's Park trees—a pretty sight, even though in the land of Cockayne.

“There's a carriage at our door!” screamed

Missy from the balcony, receiving a hurried maternal reproof for ill-behaviour. Mrs. Thornycroft wondered who the unopportune visitor could be.

It was a lady, who gave no name, but wished to know if Mr. Locke Harper were there, and if so, would he come to the carriage and speak to her a moment?

Nathanael did so, looking not less surprised than the rest of the party. After five minutes had elapsed, he was still absent from the room.

“Very odd!” observed Emma, half in jest, half earnest; “I should inquire into the matter if I were you. Let me see—I fancy the carriage is still at the door. It would be rude to peep, you know, but we can inquire of the maid.”

“No,” said Agatha, gently removing Mrs. Thornycroft’s hand from the bell; “Mr.

Harper will doubtless tell me all that is necessary. He is perfectly able to conduct his own affairs."

It was a speech implying more indifference than she really felt, for this mysterious interview did not quite please her. She tried vainly to go on talking with Mrs. Thornycroft, and actually started when she heard the carriage drive off, and Nathanael come up-stairs.

His countenance was a good deal troubled, but he did not give the slightest explanation—not even when Mrs. Thornycroft joked him about his supposed "business."

"With a lady, too ! Not, I hope, a young lady?"

"What did you say ?" he asked, absently, his eyes fixed afar off on Agatha.

"I hope your visitor in the carriage was not a young lady?"

"No." The answer was in a tone that put an end to any more jesting.

Nathanael sat down, and tried to take up the thread of politics just dropped with Mr. Thornycroft, but only for a few minutes. Then stealing round by Miss Bowen's side, he whispered:

"I want to speak to you: would you mind coming home soon?"

"At once, if you wish it," she answered, perceiving that something was wrong, and feeling towards him too much of kindness and too little of jealous love, to be in any way displeased at his strange behaviour.

"Will you do it, then, dear Agatha? Keep them from talking to me."

Agatha was ill at contrivance, but she managed somehow to get away; and before it was dark she and her betrothed were out in the broad terrace.

"Now," said she, taking his arm kindly, "if anything is amiss, you can tell me all as we walk home. Better walk than ride."

“No, we must ride; I would not lose a minute,” Nathanael answered, as he hurried her into a conveyance, and gave the order to drive to Bedford-square.

Miss Bowen felt a twinge of repugnance at this control so newly exercised over the liberty of her actions; but her good-heartedness still held out, and she waited patiently for her lover to explain. However, he seemed to forget that any explanation was necessary. He leaned back in the corner quite silent, with his hand over his eyes. Had she loved him, or not known that he was her lover, Agatha would soon have essayed the womanly part of comforter, but now timidity restrained her.

At length timidity was verging into distrust, when he suddenly said, just as they were entering the square :

“I have used the dear right you lately

gave me, in taking a strange liberty with you and your house. I have appointed to meet me there to-night one whom I must see, and whom I could not well see in any other way—a lady—a stranger to you. But, stay, she is here!”

And as they stopped at the door, where another carriage had stopped likewise, Nathanael unceremoniously leaped out, and went to this “mysterious stranger.”

“Go in, dear Agatha,” said he, returning; “go to your own sitting-room, and I will bring her to you.”

Agatha, half reluctant to be so ordered about, and thoroughly bewildered likewise, mechanically obeyed. Nevertheless, with a sort of pleasure that this humdrum courtship was growing into something interesting at last, she waited for the intruding “lady.”



That she was a lady, the first glimpse of her as she entered the room leaning rather heavily on Nathanael's arm, brought sufficient conviction. She was tall, and a certain slow, soft way of moving, cast about her an atmosphere of sweet dignity. Her age was not easily distinguishable, but her voice, in the few words addressed to Mr. Harper, "Is your friend here?" seemed not that of a very young woman.

In her presence, Miss Bowen instinctively rose.

"Yes, she is here," said Nathanael, answering the stranger. Then, nerving himself to explain everything, "You could not know what I wrote yesterday to my father and to Elizabeth. She is Agatha Bowen, my—my wife that will be. Agatha, this lady is Miss Anne Valery."

It would be hard to say which of the two thus suddenly introduced to each other was

most surprised. However, the elder lady recovered herself soonest.

“I was not aware of this ; but I am very glad. And I need not now apologise for thus intruding.”

She went up to the young betrothed, and took her by the hand warmly, seeming at once and without further explanation to comprehend all ; while on Agatha's side, her look, her voice, her touch, communicated a sudden trust and pleasure. It was one of those instinctive, inexplicable attractions which almost every one has experienced more or less during life. She could not take her eyes off Miss Valery ; the face and manner seemed at once familiar and strange. She had never been so impressed by any woman before.

To show all hospitable attentions, to place an arm-chair for her guest, and even, as she appeared weary, to entreat her to put aside

her bonnet and mantle—seemed quite natural to Miss Bowen, just as if they had been friends of years. Anne thanked her courteously, let her do what she would—but all the while looked anxiously at Nathanael.

“ You know, we have much to say. Is she aware of what I told you ? ”

“ Not yet ; I could not tell her ; it shocked me so. Oh, my poor uncle ! ”

Agatha, who was unfastening her guest's cloak, turned round.

“ What, your Uncle Brian ? Has anything happened ? You speak almost as if he were dead.”

Anne Valery shivered.

“ Dead ! God forbid ! ” cried the young man, more deeply moved than his betrothed had ever seen him. “ But we have had ill news. He went as interpreter on a Government mission, as he had often done before ; he was so popular among the Indians. But

from some treachery shown them, the tribe grew enraged, and carried him off prisoner. Heaven only knows if they have spared his life. But I think—I feel they will. He was so just to the red men always. He is surely safe.”

“Yes, he is safe,” repeated Miss Valery, as if any alternative but that were utterly incredible and impossible.

Nathanael continued: “The tidings reached Kingcombe yesterday, and our friend here, coming to London, volunteered to bring them, and consult with me. If there is any good deed to be done, it is sure to be done by Anne Valery,” added Nathanael, stretching out his hand to hers.

She took it without speaking, being apparently much exhausted. And now that her bonnet was off, and she sitting near the lamp, Agatha discerned that Miss Valery was by no means young, or beautiful. At all

events, she was at that time in an unmarried woman's life when it ceases to signify whether she is handsome or not. Her hair at first seemed brown, but on looking closer, there appeared on either side the parting broad silvery lines, as if two snow-hands laid on the head had smoothed it down, leaving it shining still.

Agatha turned from her passing examination of Miss Valery to the subject in question, evidently so painful to her betrothed.

“You wish to consult together? Do so. Pray stay here. I am very sorry for your trouble, Mr. Harper. Anything that I can do for you or your friend, you know”—and her voice dropped softly—“it is my duty now.”

Nathanael looked at her, longing despite this grief to clasp her to his heart and say how happy he was; but he restrained him-

self, and let his eyes alone declare what he felt. They were very eloquent.

While this passed between the young people, the elder lady arose from her chair, as if quietude were painful to her.

“Nathanael, every minute is precious to anxiety such as you must feel. Have you thought what had better be done, since you are the right person to do it?”

“As yet I have thought of nothing. And, alas! what *can* be done?”

“Sit down, and let us consider,” said she, laying her hand on his, with a force soft yet steady as that of her words.

Agatha was gliding out of the room, but her lover's quick movement and Miss Valery's look stopped her.

“Do not go, Miss Bowen; you are not so unknown to me as I to you. I had much rather you stayed.”

So she took up her position a little distance off, and listened while the two friends consulted; pondering the while on what a rare kind of man Mr. Brian Harper must be to win such regard.

“You say the news came accidentally?” Mr. Harper observed. “It may not be true, then.”

“It is. I had it confirmed to-day.”

“How?”

“I went to the Colonial Office myself.” (“Kind Anne Valery!” murmured the young man.) “It was best to do so before I told you anything. You, knowing the whole facts, would then decide more readily.”

“You are right and wise as ever. Now, tell me exactly what you heard.”

“While a treaty was going forward for the Government purchase of Indian lands, there arose a quarrel, and two red men were

upon slight grounds punished cruelly. Then the whole tribe went off in the night, carrying as prisoners two Englishmen—one by force. The other is believed to have offered himself willingly as a hostage, until the reparation of what he considered an injustice shown by his countrymen to the Indians. You may guess who he was.”

“Uncle Brian, of course,” cried Nathanael, pacing the room. “Just like him! He would do the maddest things for the sake of honour.”

Anne Valery's eyes flashed in the dark a momentary brightness, as if they were growing young again.

“But his life is surely safe : all over the Indian country they respect the very name of Brian Harper. No harm can touch him—it is quite impossible!” said the young man, determinedly.

“I think so too.” And Miss Valery drew



a long breath. "Still, such danger is very terrible—is it not?" And she turned slightly, to include Agatha in the circle.

"Oh, terrible!" the girl cried, deeply interested. "But could he not be sought for—rescued? Could not a party be despatched after him? If I were a man I would head one immediately."

Miss Valery, faintly smiling, patted Agatha's hand. It was easy to see that this good heart opened itself at once to Nathanael's young betrothed.

"That is what I had in my own mind, and should have spoken of to his nephew here—a party of search, which the Canadian Government, if urged, would no doubt consent to. Nathanael could propose it—plan it. He is both ingenious and wise."

"Ah, he is; he seems to know every thing!" cried Agatha warmly. "Surely,

Mr. Harper, you could think of something—do something?”

“ I could,” said the nephew, slowly waking from a long interval of thought. “ I could do—what perhaps I ought, and will—for him who has been more than a father to me.”

“ What is that?” Agatha asked, while Miss Valery regarded him silently.

“ To go back to America—head a search; or, if that is refused me, search for him myself alone, and never give up until I find him—living or dead.”

“ Ah, do so ! that will be right, generous, noble—you could not fail.”

“ There is no saying, Agatha ; only, if done, it must be done without delay. I must start at once—in a week—nay, a day—leaving England, home, you, everything. That is hard !”

He uttered the last words inaudibly, and his left hand was suddenly clenched, as he turned and walked once up the room and down again.

Agatha knew not what to say. Only a great love, conscious of the extent of its own sacrifice, would have had boldness to urge the like upon him.

Miss Valery's sweet, quiet voice broke the troubled pause :

" You cannot start yet, Nathanael ; you would have to apply to the Government here. It would be impossible for you to leave under at least a fortnight."

" Ah !" he sighed, momentarily relieved, which was but natural. " Yet, how wrong I am ! for my poor uncle's sake I ought not to lose a day. Surely there would be some way of hastening the time, if inquiries were to be set on foot."

" I have made all that could be made ;

still, try yourself, though I fear it is useless. The suspense is bitter, but what is inevitable must be borne," said Anne, with the smile of one long used to the practice of that doctrine. "And in a fortnight—a fortnight is a long time, Miss Bowen?"

The smile, flitting to Agatha, took a cheerfulness which hitherto in the sad subject of her talk Miss Valery had not displayed. A certain benevolent meaning, which Agatha rather guessed at than discerned, was likewise visible there.

"Come," said she, "for this night we can do nothing ; but having settled what we shall do, or rather what Mr. Harper will do, let us make ourselves at rest. Be content, my dear Nathanael. Heaven will take care of him for whom we fear."

Her voice trembled, Agatha fancied ; and the young girl thought how full and generous was this kind woman's sympathy ;

likewise how good Nathanael must be to have awakened so deep a regard in such an one as Miss Anne Valery.

The clock struck ten. "We are early folk in Dorsetshire ; but as my old servant Andrews has secured my lodgings close by (I am a very independent woman, you see, Miss Bowen), if you will allow me, I should like to sit another half hour, and become a little better acquainted with you."

Agatha gave her a delighted welcome, and astonished the Ianson family by ordering all sorts of hospitalities. The three began to converse upon various matters, the only remarkable fact being that no one inquired for or alluded to a person, doubtless familiar to all—Frederick Harper. On Agatha's part this omission was involuntary ; he had quietly slipped out of her thoughts hour by hour and day by day, as her interest in him became

absorbed in others more akin to her true nature.

But though every one tried to maintain the conversation on indifferent topics, the feelings of at least two out of the three necessarily drew it back to one channel. There they sat, running over the slight nothings, probable and improbable, which in hard suspense people count up ; though still the worst Nathanael seemed to fear was the temporary hardship to which his uncle would be exposed.

“ And he is not so young as he used to be. How often have I urged him to be content with his poverty and come home. He *shall* come home now. If once I get him out of these red fellows' hands, he shall turn his face from their wild settlements for ever. He can easily do it, even if I must stay in Canada.”

The young man looked at his newly-betrothed wife, and looked away again. It was more than he could bear.

“Agatha,” said Miss Valery after a pause, during which she had closely observed both the young people—“I may call you *Agatha*, for the sake of my friend here, may I not?”

“Yes,” was the low answer.

“Well then, Agatha, shall you and I have a little talk? We need not mind that foolish boy; he was a boy, just so high, when I first knew him. Let him walk up and down the room a little, it will do him good.”

She moved to the sofa, and took Agatha by her side.

“My dear”—(there was a rare sweetness in the way Miss Valery said the usually unsweet words *my dear*)—“I need not say what, of course, we two both think, that she will be a happy woman who marries Nathanael Harper.”

Agatha, with her eyes cast down, looked everything a young girl could be expected to look under the circumstances.

“Your happiness, as well as your history, is to me not like that of an entire stranger. I once knew your father.”

“Ah, that accounts for all!” cried Agatha, delighted to gain this confirmation of her strange impression in favour of Miss Valery.

“When was this, and where was I?”

“Neither born nor thought of.”

Agatha's countenance fell. “Then of course it was impossible—yet I felt certain—I could even believe so now—that I have seen you before.”

While the girl looked, a quick shadow passed over Anne Valery's still features, for the moment entirely changing their expression. But soon returned their ordinary settled calm.

“We often fancy that strangers' faces are



familiar. It is usually held to be an omen of future affection. Let me hope that it will prove so now. I have long wished, and am truly glad, heart-glad, to see you, my dear child."

She bent Agatha's forehead towards her, and kissed it. Gradually her lips recovered their colour, and she began to talk again, showing herself surprisingly familiar with the monotonous past life of the young girl, and likewise with her present circumstances.

"How kind of you to take such an interest in me!" cried Agatha, her wonder absorbed in pleasure.

"It was natural," Anne said, rather hastily. "A woman left orphan from the cradle as I was, can feel for another orphan. It is a desolate position for a young girl."

"Ay, very desolate," said Agatha; and

suddenly the recollection crossed her mind of how doubly she should feel that desolation when her betrothed husband was gone, for how long, no one could tell! A regret arose, half tenderness, half selfishness; but she deemed it wholly the latter, and so crushed it down.

“How long have you been engaged to Nathanael?” asked Miss Valery, in a manner so sweet as entirely to soften the abruptness of the question, and win the unhesitating answer.

“A very short time—only a few days. Yet I seem to have known him for years. Oh, how good he is! how it grieves me to see him so unhappy,” whispered Agatha, watching his restless movements up and down.

“It will be a hard trial for him, this parting with you. Men like Nathanael never love lightly; even sudden passions—and his must

have been rather sudden—in them take root as with the strength of years. I am very sorry for the boy.”

And Miss Valery's eyes glistened as they rested on him whom probably from old habit she thus called.

“Well, have you done your little mysteries?” said he, coming up to the sofa, with an effort to be gay. “Have you taken my character to pieces, Anne Valery? Remember, if so, I have little enough time to recover it. A fortnight will be gone directly.”

No one answered.

“Come, make room; I *will* have my place. I *will* sit beside you, Agatha.”

There was a sort of desperation in his “I will” that indicated a great change in the reserved, timid youth. Agatha yielded as to an irresistible influence, and he placed himself by her side, putting his arm firmly round her waist, quite regardless of the pre-

sence of a third person — though about Anne there was an abiding spirit of love which seemed to take under its shadow all lovers, ay, even though she herself were an old maid. But perhaps that was the very reason.

“ I was doing you no harm, Nathanael,” said she, smiling. “ And I was thinking, like you, how soon a fortnight will be gone, and how hard it is for you to part from this little girl that loves you.”

The inference, so natural, so holy, which Miss Valery had unconsciously drawn, Agatha had not the heart to deny. She knew it was but right that she should love, and be supposed to love, her betrothed husband. And looking at him, his suffering, his strong self-denial, she almost felt that she did really love him, as a wife ought.

“ If,” said the soft voice of the good angel—  
“ if you had not known each other so short

a time, and been so newly betrothed, I should have said—judging such things by what they were when I was young,”—here she momentarily paused—“I should have said, Nathanael, that there was only one course which, as regarded both her and yourself, was wisest, kindest, best.”

“What is that?” cried he, eagerly.

“To do a little sooner what must necessarily have been done soon—to take one another’s hands—thus.”

Agatha felt strong, wild fingers grasping her own; a dizziness came over her—she shrank back crying, “No, no!” and hid herself on Miss Valery’s shoulder. Nathanael rose up and walked away.

When he returned, it was with his “good” aspect, tender and calm.

“Now, Anne, I was wrong even to think of such a thing. Assure her I will never

urge it. She is quite right in saying 'No.'—What man could expect such a sacrifice?"

"And what woman would deem it such?" whispered Miss Valery. "But I know I am a very foolish, romantic old maid, and view these things in a different light to most people. So my dear, be quite at rest," she continued, soothing the young creature, who still clung to her. "No one will urge you in any way; *he* will not, he is too generous; and I had no right even to say what I did, except from my affection for him."

She looked fondly at the young man, as if he had been still a little child, and she saw him in the light of ancient days. These impelled her to speak on earnestly.

"Another reason I had; because I am old, and you two are young. Often, it seems as if the whole world—fate, trial, circumstance—were set against all lovers to make them part.

It is a bitter thing when they part of their own free will. Accidents of all kinds—change, sorrow, even death, may come between, and they may never meet again. Agatha, Nathanael—believe one who has seen more of life than you—rarely do those that truly love ever attain the happiness of marrying one another. One half the world—the best and noblest half—thirst all their lives for that bliss which you throw away. What, Agatha, crying?”

And she tried to lift up the drooping head, but could not.

“Nay, dear; I was wrong to grieve you so. Please God, you two may meet again, and marry and be happy, even in this world. Come, Nathanael, you can say all this much better than I. Tell her you will be quite content, and wait any number of years. And, as to this parting, it is a right

and noble sacrifice of yours ; let her see how nobly you will bear it."

" Ay, Agatha, I will," said the young lover firmly, as he stood before her, half stooping, half kneeling—though not quite kneeling, even then. But his whole manner showed the crumbling away of that clear-shining but icy covering with which nature or habit had enveloped the whole man.

Agatha lifted her head, and looked at him long and earnestly.

" I will," he repeated, " I promise you I will. Only be content—and in token that you are so, give me your hand."

She gave him both, and then leaned back again on Miss Valery's shoulder.

" Tell him—I will go with him—anywhere—at any time—if it will only make him happy." .

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The same night, when Nathanael and Anne Valery had left her, Agatha sat thinking, almost in a dream, yet without either sorrow or dread—that all uncertainty was now over—that this day week would be her wedding-day.

## CHAPTER VIII.

“ I WISH, as I stated yesterday, that Miss Bowen’s property should be settled entirely upon herself. This is the only course which to my thinking can reconcile a man to the humiliation of receiving a large fortune with his wife.”

“ An odd doctrine, truly ! Where did you learn it ? ” laughed Major Harper, who was pacing the Bedford-square drawing-room with quick, uneasy steps ; while his brother stood very quiet, only looking from time to time at the closed door. It was the Saturday before the marriage ; and Agatha’s

trustee had come to execute his last guardianship of her and her property. There was lying on a corner-table, pored over by a lawyer-like individual—that formidable instrument, a marriage settlement.

“Where did I learn it?” returned Mr. Harper, smiling. “Why, where I learned most of my opinions, and everything that is good in me — with Uncle Brian. Poor Uncle Brian,” and the smile faded into grave anxiety.

“Are you really going on that mad expedition?” said the elder brother, with the tone of a man who being perturbed in his own mind is ready to take a harsh view of everything.

“I do not think it mad—and anything short of madness I ought to undertake, and shall—for him.”

“Ay,” muttered the other, “there it is, Brian always made everybody love him.”

“But,” continued Nathanael, “as I said last night to Miss Bowen, I shall do nothing foolishly. We must hold ourselves prepared for the worst ; still, if better tidings should come—though that is scarcely possible now—then, perhaps——”

“You would not go!” cried Major Harper, eagerly. “Which would of course delay your marriage. How very much better that would be.”

“Why so?” said the bridegroom, with a piercing look.

Frederick appeared confused, but threw it off with a laugh.

“Oh, women like a little longer courtship. They are never caught all in a minute, unless they are quite indifferent as to who catches them. And even then—‘marry in haste’—you know the proverb—nay, don’t be angry,” he added, as his brother turned abruptly away. “I was only jesting ; and

a happy fellow like you can afford to be laughed at by a miserable old bachelor like me."

The momentary annoyance passed. Nathanael was, indeed, too happy to be seriously vexed at anything.

"Still, for some reasons," continued Major Harper, "I wish my fair ward were not becoming my sister in such a terrible hurry. So much to be done in one week, and by a man like me, who hates the very name of business; it is next to impossible but that some things should be slurred and hurried over. For instance, there was no time, Grimes said, to draw up a long deed of settlement, showing precisely where her money was invested."

"I told you I wanted nothing of the kind. I scarcely understand your English law. But can it not be stated in plain legal form—a dozen lines would surely do it—that every

farthing Agatha has I settle upon herself exclusively from the day she becomes my wife."

"That is done. I—I—in fact, Mr. Grimes had already advised such a course as being the shortest."

"Then what is the use of saying any more about it?"

"But, brother," observed Major Harper, in whose manner was perceptible a certain vague uneasiness, "if—though I assure you Grimes has transacted all these matters, and he is a sharp man of business, while I am none—still, if it would be any satisfaction to you to know particulars concerning where Miss Bowen's money is invested——"

"In the funds; and to remain there by her father's will, I think you said."

"Precisely. It *was* invested there," returned the brother, with an accent so light on the past tense that Nathanael, pre-occu-

pied with other things than money matters, did not observe it.

“Well, then, so let it stay. Don’t let us talk any more about this matter. I trust entirely to you. To whom should I trust, if not to my own brother?”

At these hearty words Major Harper’s face, quick in every mobile expression of feeling, betrayed no slight discomposure. He walked the room in a mood of agitation, compared to which the bridegroom’s own restlessness was nothing. Then he went to the farther end of the apartment, and hurriedly read over the marriage settlement.

“Faugh, Grimes ! what balderdash is this?” he whispered angrily. “Balderdash ?—nay, downright lies !”

“Drawn up exactly as you desired, and as we arranged, Major Harper,” answered Mr. Grimes, formally. “Settling upon the lady

and her heirs for ever all her property now in the 'Three per Cent. Consols.' ”

“Just Heavens ! and there's not a penny of it there !”

“But there will be by the time the marriage is celebrated, or soon after—since you are determined to sell out those shares.”

“I wish I could—I wish to Heaven I could !” cried the poor Major, in a despair that required all the warnings of his legal adviser to smother it down, so as to keep their conference private. “I've been driven nearly mad going from broker to broker in the City to-day. I might as well attempt to sell out shares in the Elysian Fields as in that confounded Wheal Caroline.”

“Fluctuations, my dear sir ; mere fluctuations ! 'Tis the same in all Cornish mines. Yet, as I said, both concerning your own little property and Miss Bowen's afterwards,



I would wish no better investment. I have the greatest confidence in the Wheal Caroline shares."

"Confidence," echoed the Major, ruefully. "But where is my brother's confidence in me, when I tell him—— 'Pon my life, I can't tell him!"

"There is not the slightest need; I have accurate information from the mine, which next week will raise the shares to ten per cent. premium, and then, since you are so determined to sell out that most promising investment——"

"I will, as sure as I live. I vow I'll never be trustee to any young lady again, as long as my name is Frederick Harper. However, if this must stand"—and he read from the deed—" 'all property now invested in the Three per Cents.'—Oh, oh." Major Harper shook his head, with a deep-drawn sigh of miserable irresolution.

Yet there lay the parchment, sickening him with its prevaricating if not lying face ; and his invisible good angel kept pulling him on one side—nay, at last pulled him half-way across the room to where, absorbed in a reverie—pardonable under the circumstances—his brother sat.

“Nathanael, pray get out of that brown study, and have five minutes’ talk with me. If you only knew the annoyance I have endured all this week concerning Agatha’s fortune ! How thankful I shall be to transfer it from my hands into yours.”

“Thank you !” said the lover, rather absently.

“And I hope it will give you less trouble and more reward than it has given me,” continued the elder brother, still anxiously beating about the bush, ere he came to a direct confession. “I declare, I have been as anxious for the young lady’s

benefit as if I had intended marrying her myself."

The bridegroom's quick, fiery glance showed Major Harper that he had gone a little too far, even in privileged jesting. "Nathanael, I assure you——"

But Nathanael had heard the door open. He hastily went forward and met his bride. With her were Mr. and Mrs. Thornycroft, Dr. and Mrs. Ianson, and another lady. The latter quickly passed out of the immediate circle, and sat down in a retired corner of the room.

Agatha looked pale and worn out, which was no wonder, considering that for several days she had endured morning, noon, and night, all the wearisome preparations which the kind-hearted Emma deemed indispensable to "a really nice wedding." But her betrothed noticed her paleness with troubled eyes.

"You are not ill, my darling?"

“No,” said Agatha, abruptly, blushing lest any one should hear the tender word, which none had ever used to her before, and blushing still deeper when, meeting Major Harper’s anxious looks fixed on them both, she fancied he had heard. A foolish sensitiveness made her turn away from her lover, and talk immediately to the first person who came in her way.

Meanwhile Mr. Thornycroft and Dr. Ianson, with a knowledge that time was precious, had gone at once to the business of the meeting, and were deep in perusal of the marriage settlement of which they were to be witnesses.

“Why, Miss Bowen, you are a richer girl than I knew,” said Emma’s worthy husband, coming forward, with his round pleasant face. “I congratulate you ; at this particular crisis, when hundreds are being ruined by last year’s mania for railway

speculation, it is most fortunate to have safe funded property."

Major Harper's conscience groaned within, and it was all over. He resigned himself to stern necessity and force of circumstances—hoping everything would turn out for the best.

Then they all gathered round the table, and Mr. Grimes droned out the necessary formalities. The bride-elect listened, half in a dream—the bridegroom rather more attentively.

"Are you quite sure," said he, pausing, with the pen in his hand, and casting his eyes keenly over the document—"are you quite sure this deed answers the purpose I intended? This is the total amount of property which Mr. Bowen left?"

And he looked from his brother to the lawyer with an anxiety which long afterwards recurred bitterly to Agatha's mind.

Mr. Grimes bowed, and assured him that all was correct. So the young bridegroom signed with a steady hand, and afterwards watched the rather tremulous signature of his bride. Then an inexpressible content diffused itself over his face. Putting her arm in his, he led her away proudly, as though she were already his own.

Confused by her novel position, Agatha looked instinctively for some womanly encouragement, but Emma Thornycroft was busily engaged in admiring observation of the bold signature of her James, and Mrs. Ianson was worse than nobody.

“Miss Valery !—what has become of Miss Valery ?” said the bride, her eyes wandering restlessly around. Other eyes followed hers—Major Harper’s. Incredulously these rested on the silent lady in the distance, whose whole mien, figure, and attire, in the plain dark dress, and close morning cap,

marked her a woman undeniably and fearlessly middle-aged.

“Is it possible!” he exclaimed. “Can that be Anne Valery?”

The lady arose, and met him with extended hand. “It is Anne Valery, and she is very glad to see you, Major Harper.”

They shook hands ; his confused manner contrasting strongly with her perfect serenity. After a moment Miss Bowen, who could not help watching, heard him say :

“I, too, am glad we have met at last. It is as friends.”

“I was never otherwise to you,” she answered, gently ; and joined the circle.

This rather singular greeting, noticed by none but herself, awakened Agatha's old wrath against Major Harper, lest, as her romantic imagination half suggested, the secret of Anne Valery's always remaining Anne Valery, was, that his old companion

had been first on the illustrious Frederick's long list of broken hearts. If so, never was there a broken heart that made so little outward show, or wore such a cheerful exterior as Miss Valery's.

But Agatha's own heart was too full of the busy trembling fancies which throng round a young bride to conjecture on the hearts of other people. Very soon Major Harper quitted the house, and the Thornycrofts also. She was left alone with her lover and with Anne—Anne, who ever since her engagement had seemed to keep a steady watch over her. They had rarely met, and for brief intervals ; yet Agatha felt that she was perpetually under this guardianship, gentle, though strong—holding her fluctuating spirit firm, and filling her with all cheerful hopes and tender thoughts of her future husband. She seemed to grow a better woman every time she saw Anne Valery. It



was inexpressibly sweet to turn for a few moments each day from the lace and the ribbons, the dresses and the bride-cake, and hear Anne talk of what true marriage really was—when two people entirely and worthily loved one another.

And Agatha had not the courage to confess what she began to hope was a foolish doubt, that the “love” which Miss Valery seemed to take for granted she felt towards Nathanael, was a something which as yet she herself did not quite understand.

That Saturday afternoon, nevertheless, she was calmer and more at ease. Signing the settlement had removed all doubts from her mind, and make her realise clearly that she would soon be Mr. Harper's wife. And he was so tender over her, so happy. Her marriage with him appeared to make every one happy. That very day he had brought

her a heap of letters from Dorsetshire ; her first welcome from his kindred—her own that would be.

They seemed to know all about her—from Anne Valery doubtless—and to be delighted at Nathanael's choice. There was a kind but formal missive from the old father, implying his dignified satisfaction that at last one of his sons would marry to keep up the family name. From the daughters there were letters, varying in style and matter, but all cordial (except, perhaps, Eulalie's, who had years to wait before *she* married, and was rather cross accordingly). One note, in neat and delicate writing, made Agatha's heart beat ; for it was signed, " Your affectionate *sister*, Elizabeth."

She, who had longed for a sister all her life ! Heaven was very good to her, to give her all ties through one ! It seemed, indeed,

right and holy that she should be married to Nathanael.

One only unutterable terror she had, which by a fortunate chance was never alluded to by any one, and she was too much occupied to have it often forced on her mind. This was, the thought of having to cross the seas to Canada.

“Oh!” she sighed, as she sat, with the letters on her lap, listening to what her lover said of his sisters and his family—“oh! that we could do as your father seems to wish, and go and live in Dorsetshire, near Kingcombe Holm.”

“I wish it too, if it would please you, dear; but it seems impossible. How could I live in England without a profession?—even supposing Uncle Brian did consent to return and settle at home. Sometimes, but very rarely, he has hinted at such a possibi-

lity.—He has indeed, Anne,” continued the young man, noticing how keenly Miss Valery’s eyes were fixed on him.

“I am glad to hear it,” was all her reply.

“But he always said he would never return till he was grown either very rich or very old. Alas! the latter chance may come, but the former never! Poor Uncle Brian! If he comes at all, it is sure not to be for many years.”

“Not for many years!” repeated Miss Valery, who was crossing over to Agatha’s side with a piece of rich lace she had been unfolding. As she walked, her hand was unconsciously pressed upon her chest, a habit she had after any quick movement. And, leaning over Agatha, she breathed painfully and hard.

“My dear?” The young girl looked up.  
“Your sisters that are to be, desired me to

give you from them a wedding-present. It was to be your veil. But I had a whim that I would like to give you your veil myself. Here it is. Will you accept it, with my love ?”

So saying, she laid over the bride's head a piece of old point lace, magnificent in texture. Agatha had never seen anything like it.

“ Oh, Miss Valery, to think of your giving me this ! It is fit for a queen !” And she looked at Mr. Harper, hesitating to accept so costly a gift.

“ Nay, take it,” said he, smiling. “ Never scruple at its costliness ; it cannot be richer than Anne's heart.” And he grasped his old friend's hand warmly.

Miss Valery continued, with a slight colour rising in her cheek, “ This was given me twenty years ago for a wedding-

veil. It has been wasted upon me, you see, but I wish some one to wear it, and would like it to be worn by Mrs. Locke Harper."

Agatha blushed crimson. Nathanael looked delighted. Neither noticed Anne Valery; who, her passing colour having sank into a still deeper paleness—quietly returned to her seat, and soon after quitted the house.

## CHAPTER IX.

IT was a most unconscionably early hour on the wedding morning when Mrs. Thornycroft, who had insisted on mounting guard overnight in Bedford-square, to see that all things were made ready to go off "merry as a marriage bell," came into Agatha's room and roused the bride.

"I never knew such a thing in all my life! Well, he is the most extraordinary young man! What is to be done, my dear?"

"What — what?" said Agatha, waking, with a confused notion that something very dreadful had happened, or was going to hap-

pen. She recollected that this day on which she so early opened her eyes was some day of great solemnity. It seemed so like that of her father's funeral.

“Don't be frightened, love. Nothing has occurred; only there is Mr. Harper in the parlour below, wanting to speak with you. I never heard of such a request from a bridegroom. It is contrary to all rules of common sense and decorum.”

“Hush!” said Agatha, trying to collect her thoughts. “Tell me exactly his message.”

“That he wished to speak with you at once, before you dress for church; and will wait for you in the dining-room. What—you are not going to do as he desires?—I wouldn't! One should never *obey* till after marriage.”

Agatha made no answer, but composedly began to dress. In a few minutes she had once



more put on the mourning, laid aside as she thought for ever the night before, and had gone down-stairs to her bridegroom.

He was standing in the only available corner of the room not occupied by a chaotic mass of hymeneal preparations, and gazing vacantly out into the square, where the trees cast the long shadows of early morning, while the merry little sparrows kept up a perpetual din.

As the door moved, Mr. Harper turned round. He had a sickly, worn look, as if he had scarcely slept all night, and in his manner was a strange mingling of trouble and of joy.

"Agatha—how kind! I ought to apologise," he began, taking both her hands. "But no! I cannot."

"Nothing is wrong? No misfortune happened?"

"Misfortune? God forbid! Surely I do not look as if it were a misfortune? I am

only too glad—too happy. Whatever results from it, I am indeed happy !”

“ Then so am I, whatsoever it may be,” returned Agatha, softly. “ Still, do tell me.”

Her bridegroom, as he pressed her to his bosom, looked as if he had for the moment forgotten all about his tidings ; but afterwards, when her second entreaty came, he took out a letter and bade her read, holding her fast the while with a light, firm hand on her shoulder. He seemed almost to fear that at the news he brought she would glide out of his grasp like snow.

“ It is an odd hand—strange to me,” said Agatha. “ Is it”—and a sudden thought struck her—“ is it——”

“ Yes—thank God !”

“ Oh, then, he is safe—I am so glad—so glad !” cried Agatha, in the true sympathy of her heart. But her very gladness appeared to affect contrariwise the troubled mood of

her lover. His hand dropped imperceptibly from her shoulder—he sat down.

“Read the letter, which came late last night. I thought you would be pleased—that was why I thus disturbed you.”

Agatha, who had not yet learned the joy or pain of reading momentarily the changes of a beloved face, immediately perused the letter. It was rather eccentric of its kind :

“Lodge of O-me-not-tua.

“MY DEAR BOY,

“If ever you get into the hands of those red devils, be not alarmed: it isn't so bad as it seems. If you saw me now, in the big buffalo-cloak of a medicine-man, after smoking dozens of pipes of peace with every one of the tribe, sitting at the door of my lodge, with miles of high prairie-grass rolling in waves towards the sunset, you would rather envy me than otherwise, and cry out, as I have often done, ‘Away with civilisation!’

“I am not scalped—I thought I should not be; the tribe (it wastes valuable paper to write their long name, but you will have heard it)—the tribe know me too well. I make a capital white medicine-man. I might have escaped any day, but, pshaw! honour!—So I choose to see a little of the great western forests, until I know how my two red friends have been treated on Lake Winnipeg shore. But in no case is any harm likely to come to me, except those chances of mortality which are common to all.

“You will receive this (which a worthy psalm-singing missionary conveys to New York) almost as soon as the news of our adventure reaches Europe. I send it to relieve you, dear nephew, and all friends, if I have any left, from further anxiety concerning me, and especially from useless search, as I shall not return to Montreal until it seems to me good.

“ Therefore, stay in Europe as long as, or longer than you planned, and God prosper you, Nathanael, my good boy.

“ Your affectionate Uncle,

“ BRIAN LOCKE HARPER.

“ I trust earnestly that this scrawl will reach Kingcombe Holm. Possibly, no more news of me may ever reach there.—Yet I fear not, for He who is everywhere is likewise in the wild western prairies; and life is not so sweet that I should dread its ending. Still, if it does end, remember me to my nieces, my brother, and all old friends, including Anne Valery. If living, I shall reappear sometime, somewhere.

“ B. L. H.”

“ This is indeed happy news;—so far,” said Agatha, “ though he seems in no cheerful mood.”

“ Melancholy was always his way at times.”

“What a strange man he must be!” she continued, still thinking more of the letter than of anything else. “But”—and she turned to Nathanael—“your mind is now at rest? You will not need to go to America?”

“Not just yet.”

She looked at him a moment in surprise, for there was something peculiar in his manner. She felt half angry with him for sitting so still, and speaking so briefly, while she herself was trembling with delight. “Have you told Miss Valery?” He shook his head. “Ah, then, go at once and tell her, so happy as she will be! Do go.”

“Presently. Come and sit down here. I want to talk to you, Agatha.”

She let him place her by his side. He took her hands, and regarded her earnestly.

“Do you remember what day this was to have been?”

“Was to have been?” she repeated, and

instinctively guessed what he had doubtless come to say. Her heart began to beat violently, and her eyes dropped in confusion.

“I say ‘*was*,’ because, if you desire it, it shall not be. I see the very idea is a relief to you. I saw it in your sudden joy.”

Agatha was amazed—she had till this moment never thought of such a thing. Mr. Harper’s whole manner of speech and proceeding was so very incomprehensible—like a lover’s—that she told the entire truth in simply saying “that she did not understand him.”

“Let me repeat it in plainer words.” But the plainer words would not come; after one or two vain efforts, he sat with averted face, speechless. At last he said abruptly, “Agatha, do you wish to defer our marriage?”

As he spoke, his grasp of her hand was so fierce that it positively hurt her. “Oh, let me

go—you are not kind,” she cried, shrinking from the pain, which he did not even perceive he had inflicted—so strange a mood was upon him. He loosed her hand at once, and stood up before her, speaking vehemently.

“ I meant to be kind—very kind—just in the way that I knew would most please you. I meant to tell you that I wish you to hold yourself quite free, both as to this day or any other days: that you have only to say the word, and—— What a fool I am making of myself!”

Muttering the last words, he turned and walked quickly to the far end of the room, leaving Agatha to meditate. It was a new thing to see such passion in him; and while half frightened she was interested and touched. She would have been more so, but for a certain satirical bitterness which roused her pride, until she could not do as



she had at first intended—follow him, and ask why he was angry. The humility of love was not yet hers.

So she sat without moving, her eyes fixed on her hand, where the red mark left by her lover's grasp was slowly disappearing; until, a minute after, he approached.

“Was that the mark of my fingers on your wrist? Did I hurt you, my poor Agatha?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Forgive me!” And sitting down beside her, he bent his lips to where his rude grasp had been, kissing the little wrist over and over again, though he did not speak.

His concession in this, the first ripple which had ever stirred their calmest of all calm courtships, moved Agatha even more than his sudden gust of passion. It is a curious fact, that some women—and they not of the weaker or more foolish kind—like very

much to be ruled. A strong nature is instinctively attracted by one still stronger. Most certainly Agatha had never so distinctly felt the cords—not exactly of love, but of some influence akin thereto—which this young man had netted round her, as when he began to draw them with a tight, firm hand, less that of a submissive lover than of a dominant husband. She had never liked him half so well as when, taking her hand once more into his determined hold, he said—gently, indeed, but in a tone that would be answered—

“Now, tell me, what do you wish?”

“What do I wish?” echoed she, feeling as though some hard but firm support were about to relax from her, leaving her trembling and insecure to the world’s open blasts. “I do not know—I cannot tell. Talk to me a little ; that will help me to judge.”

His eye brightened, though faintly. “I will

“speak, but you shall decide, for all lies in your own hands. I thought this right, and came here determined on telling you so.”

“Well?” said Agatha, expectantly.

“You promised me this hand to-day, believing I was to leave England at once. My not leaving frees you from that promise—at least at present. If you would rather wait until you know me better, or loved me better, then——”

“What then?”

“We will quite blot out this day—crush it—destroy it, no matter what it was to have been. We will enter upon to-morrow, not as wife and husband, but mere lovers—friends—acquaintance—anything you like. Nay—I am growing a fool again.”

He put his hand to his forehead, sighed heavily, and then continued with less violence.

“If this is what you wish—as from your silence I conclude it is—be assured, Agatha,

that I shall consent. I will take no wife against her will. The kisses of her lips would sting me, if there were no love in her heart."

Agatha was still silent.

"Well then, it must be so," said he, in slow, measured speech. "I must go away out of this house, for I am no bridegroom. You may tell the women to put away those white baubles till they are again wanted—which may be—never!"

She looked up questioningly.

"I repeat—*never*. The currents of life, so many and so fierce, may sweep us asunder at any moment. I may become mercenary, and choose a richer wife even than yourself; or you may turn from me to some one more pleasing, more winning—my brother, perhaps——"

Agatha recoiled, while the angry blood flashed from brow to throat. Her lover saw it, and for the moment a strange intentness was

in his gaze. But immediately he smiled, as a man would at some horrible phantom of his own creating, and continued with a softened manner :

“Or, if our own wills hold secure, many things may happen, as Anne Valery forewarned us, to prevent our union. Even ere a month or two—for if you are ever mine it must be as soon as then—but even within that time one or other of us may have gone away where no loving, no regretting, can ever call us back any more.”

Terrible was the imagined solitude of a world from which had passed the only being who cherished her—the only being whom she thoroughly honoured. Agatha drew closer to Nathanael.

“Still, for all that,” continued he, striving to keep even in his mind the balance of honour and generous tenderness against the

arguments of selfish passion, "if for any reason you wish to postpone this day for weeks, months, or years, I will take the chance. All shall be as you deem best for your own happiness. As for mine—I will try to be content."

He paused a little, but it was a pause which no woman could misunderstand. Then, turning back to her, he said in a low tone,

"When shall I go away, Agatha?"

Her brow dropped slowly against his arm, as, much agitated, yet not unhappy, she whispered the one word "*Never!*"

For one moment Agatha felt against her own the loud convulsive throbs of the heart that loved her—an embrace which, in its utter outpouring of rapture, was like none that came before it, or after. When she learned to count and chronicle such tokens of love, as one begins to count each wave when the sand grows dry,

this stood firm, immutable—a truth, a reality, which no succeeding doubts could gainsay.

It lasted, as such moments can but last, a space too brief to be reckoned, dying out of its own intensity. Agatha slid from her lover's arms, and swiftly passing out at the door, met Emma coming in. The unlucky bridegroom was left to make his own explanation to Mrs. Thornycroft, and how he performed that feat remains to this day a mystery.

Solemnly, and much affected, the bride went up-stairs to put on her wedding-garments.

Anne Valery had just arrived. She sat alone in Miss Bowen's dressing-room, playing with the wedding-wreath. Her face wore a thoughtful, sickly, sad look, but the moment she heard some one at the door this expression vanished.

“So, my dear, you have a rather unconscionable bridegroom, Mrs. Thornycroft tells me. He has been here already.”

Suddenly all that had happened recurred to Agatha. She forgot her own agitation in the joy of being the first to bring good news.

“Ah, you little know why he came. Uncle Brian—there is a letter from Uncle Brian.”

And in her warm-heartedness she threw her arms round Miss Valery's neck. She was very much surprised that Anne did not speak a single word, and that the cheek against which her young glowing one was pressed felt as cold as marble.

“Are you not glad, Miss Valery?”

“Yes, very glad. Now, will you go downstairs and fetch me the letter?”

And, gently putting the young girl from her, Anne sat down. As Agatha left the room, she fancied she heard a faint sound—a



sigh or gasp ; but Miss Valery had not moved. She sat as at first—her hands clasped on her lap, the veil of her bonnet falling over her face. And coming back some minutes after, Agatha found her in precisely the same position.

“Thank you, dear.” She held out her hand for the letter, and then retired with it to a far window. It took a good while to read. All the time that the young bride was being dressed by Emma and the maid, Miss Valery stood in that recess, her back turned toward them, apparently reading or pondering over that strange scrawl from the Far West.

At last Mrs. Thornycroft gently hinted that there was hardly time for her to return home and dress for the wedding.

“Dress for the wedding,” repeated Anne, absently. “Oh, yes ; I remember, it was to be early. No fear ! I will be quite ready.”

She crossed the room, walking slowly, but at the door turned to look at the bride, on whose head Emma was already placing the orange-blossoms.

“Doesn't she look pretty?” appealed the gratified matron-ministrant.

“Yes; very pretty.—God bless her!” said Miss Valery, and kissed her on the forehead. Agatha quite started—the lips were so cold.

“Well!” cried Emma Thornycroft, as the door closed, “I do wish, my dear, that little Missy had been grown up enough to be your bridesmaid instead of that very quiet, ordinary-looking old maid. But, after all, the contrast will be the greater.”

At nine o'clock the bride's half of the wedding-party were all safely assembled in Doctor Ianson's drawing-room, and everything promised to go off successfully—to which result Emma, now all in her glory,

prided herself as having been the main contributor—and no doubt the kind, active, sensible little matron was right.—When lo! —there came an unlucky *contretemps*.

Major Harper, who of course was to give away the bride, sent word that on account of sudden business he could not possibly be at the church before eleven. At that hour he promised faithfully to meet his brother there. The note which Mr. Harper sent over was a very hurried and disjointed scrawl. This was all that the vexed bridegroom knew of the matter.

So for two long hours Agatha sat in her wedding-dress, strangely quiet and silent—sometimes playing with the wreath of orange-blossoms which her lover had sent her, and which, being composed of natural flowers, according to a whim of Mr. Harper's, was already beginning to fade. Still,

she refused to put it aside, though the prudent Emma warned her it would be quite withered before she reached the church; "as was sure to be the case when people were so ridiculous as to wear real flowers."

The good soul went about, half scolding, half crying; hoping nothing might happen, or consoling herself with looking alternately at her pretty peach-coloured dress, and her "James," who walked about, indulging in gay reminiscences of his own wedding, and looking the most comfortable specimen imaginable of a worthy middle-aged "family man." Nevertheless, in spite of Mr. Thornycroft's efforts to cheer up the dreariness of the group, it was a great relief to everybody when, at the earliest reasonable time, the bride's small party started, and were at length assembled under the dark arches of Bloomsbury Church—darker than

usual to-day, for the morning had gloomed over, and become close, hot, and thundery.

Punctually at eleven, but not a minute before, which—Emma whispered—was certainly not quite courteous in a bridegroom, Mr. Harper came in. There was no one with him.

“My brother not here?” he said, in anxiety.

Some one hinted that Major Harper was never very punctual.

“He ought to be, this day at least,” observed Mr. Thornycroft. “And I am confident I saw him not half an hour ago walking homeward round the other side of Bedford-square. Do not be alarmed about him, pray.” This last remark was addressed to Agatha, who, overpowered by the closeness of the day, and by these repeated disasters, had begun to turn pale.

Nathanael watched her with a keen anxiety, which only agitated her the more. Every one seemed uneasy and rather dull;—a circumstance not very remarkable, since, in spite of the popular delusion on that subject, very few ever really look happy at a wedding. It makes clearer to each one the silent ghost sitting in every human heart, which may take any form—bliss long desired, lost, or unfulfilled—or, in the fulfilling changed to pain—or, at best, looked back upon with a memory half-pensive if only because it is the past.

For forty interminable minutes did the little party wait in the dreary church aisles, until the clock, and likewise the beadle, warned them it was near the canonical hour.

“What are we to do?” whispered the bridegroom, looking towards Anne Valery. She took his hand, and drawing it towards

Agatha's, which hung on her arm, said earnestly :

“ Wait no longer—life's changes will not wait. Marry her *now*—nothing should come between lovers that love one another.”

Anne's manner, so faltering, so different from her usual self, irresistibly impressed the hearers. Silently the little group moved to the altar ; the clergyman, weary of delay, hurried the service, and in a few minutes the young creatures who eight weeks before had scarcely heard each other's names, were made “ not two, but one flesh.”

It was all like a dream to Agatha Bowen ; she never believed in its reality until, signing that name, “ Agatha Bowen,” in the register-book, she remembered she was so signing it for the last time. A moment after, Emma's husband, who had assumed the office of father to the bride, cordially

shaking her hand, wished all happiness to *Mrs. Harper*.

Agatha started, shivered, and burst into tears. It was a natural thing, after so many hours of overstrained excitement; nor were her tears those of unhappiness, yet they seemed, every drop, to burn on her bridegroom's heart. To crown all, while these unlucky tears were still falling, some one at the vestry door cried out, "There's Major Harper."

It was indeed himself. He entered the church hurriedly—very pale—with beads of dew standing on his brow.

"Are they married? Only tell me—are they married?" cried he.

Some uncontrollable feeling made Nathanael move to his wife's side and snatch her hand.

"Yes," said he, meeting his brother's eye, "we are married."



Major Harper sunk into one of the vestry-chairs, muttering something, inaudible to all ears save those which seemed fatally gifted with preternatural acuteness—the young bridegroom's. Nathanael fancied—nay, was certain—that he heard his brother say, “*Oh Heaven, poor Agatha.*” Like lightning his eye shot down to his bride, whose weeping had changed into a look of frightened surprise. He dropped her hand, then with a determined air again took possession of it, saying sternly to his brother:

“What is the reason of all this? Is anything amiss?”

“No, nothing—have I said anything?”

“Then why startle us thus? It is not right, Frederick.”

“Hush—perhaps he is ill,” whispered Anne Valery.

Major Harper looked up, and among the many inquiring eyes, met hers. It seemed

to fix him, sting him, rouse him to self-command.

“I am quite well,” he cried, with a hoarse attempt at laughter. “A gay bachelor always feels doubly cheery at a wedding. So it is all over, Nathanael? I beg your pardon for being too late; but I have been running about town on important business, till I am half dead. Still, let me offer my congratulations to the bride.”

He came forward jauntily, seized Agatha's hand and was about to kiss it, but for a slight shrinking on her part. Immediately his face became clouded with a wild remorse, a perfect agony of sorrow. At least so it appeared to one who never for a moment relaxed his watch—the younger brother.

“Really,” said Mr. Thornycroft, who, during the few minutes thus occupied, had bustled in and out of the vestry—“really, are

we never intending to come home? Somebody must make a diversion here. Major Harper, will you take my wife? Miss Valery, allow me?"

This fortunate interference effected a change. All moved away a little from the bridegroom, who was still standing by his wife's chair.

"Agatha—will you come?"

She mechanically rose; Mr. Harper drew her arm in his, and led her down the aisle. There were a few stray lookers-on at the church-door, who peered at them curiously. An inexplicable shadow hung over them. Never were a newly-married couple more silent or more grave.

Only, as they stood on the entrance-steps that were wet with a past shower of thunder-rain, and Agatha in her thin white shoes was walking right on, her husband drew her back.

“It will not hurt me. Do let me go,” she said.

“No, you must not. You are mine now,” was the answer, with a look that would have made the tone of control sound in any loving bride’s ear the sweetest ever heard.

He left Agatha in the church, and hurried a little in advance. His brother and Mrs. Thornycroft were standing at the porch, Emma laughing and whispering. And while waiting for the carriage, it so chanced that Nathanael caught what they were saying.

“Why, Major Harper, you look as dull as if you had been in love with Agatha yourself! And after what you confessed to me, I did positively believe she was in love with you.”

“Agatha in love with me! really you flatter me,” said Major Harper, looking down and tapping his boot, with his own self-complacent, regretful smile.

“ I did indeed think it, from her agitation when I told her so.—Hush! is that any one near us? But then Agatha——”

“Don’t speak of her,” cried Major Harper, in a burst of real emotion. “And she liked me so well, poor child! Oh, I wish to Heaven I had married her myself, and saved her from——”

Here a voice was heard calling “Mr. Harper—Mr. Harper,” but the bridegroom was nowhere to be seen. Some one—not her husband—put Agatha into the carriage. Several minutes after, Nathanael appeared.

“Where have you been? Your wife is waiting.”

“My wife?” He looked round bewildered, as if the words struck him with the awful irrevocable sense of what was done. Hurriedly he ran down the steps, sprang into the carriage beside Agatha, and they drove away.

Through many streets and squares they passed, for the breakfast was to be at Emma's house. Agatha sat for the first time alone with her husband. The sun just coming out threw a soft crimson light through the closed blinds; the very air felt warm and sweet, like love. Agatha's heart was stirred with a new tenderness towards him into whose keeping she had just given her whole life.

For a little while she sat, her eyes cast down, wondering what he would say or do, whether he would take her hand, or draw her softly to his breast and let her cry her heart out there, as she almost longed to do—poor fatherless, motherless, brotherless, sisterless girl, who in her husband alone must concentrate every earthly tie.

But he never spoke—never moved. He leaned back in the carriage as pale as death, his lips rigidly shut together, his eyes shut too, except that now and then they opened

and closed again, to show that he was not in a state of unconsciousness. But towards his young wife no look ever once wandered.

At length he started as from a trance and saw her sitting there, very quiet, for the pride of her nature was beginning to rise at this strange treatment from him to whom she had just given herself—her all. She was nervously moving the fingers of her left hand, where the newly placed ring felt heavy and strange.

Nathanael snatched the hand with violence.

“Agatha—are you not my Agatha? Tell me the truth—the whole truth. I will have it from you!”

“Mr. Harper!” she exclaimed, half frightened, half angry.

His long, searching gaze tried to read her every feature—her pale cheeks—her lips

proud, nay, almost sullen—her eyes, from which the softness so lately visible had changed into inquietude and trouble. There was in her all maidenly innocence—no one could doubt that; but nothing could be more unlike the shy tenderness of a bride, loving, and married for love.

Slowly, slowly, the young bridegroom's gaze fell from her, and his thoughts settled into dull conviction. All his violence ceased, leaving an icy composure, which in itself bore the omen of its lasting stay.

“Forgive me,” he said, in a kind but cold voice, while his vehement grasp relaxed into a loose hold. “You are my dear wife now, and I will try to be a good husband to you, Agatha.”

Stooping forward, his lips just touched her cheek—which shrank from him, Agatha scarcely knew why.



“I see!” he muttered to himself. “Well, be it so! And God help us both!”

The carriage stopped. Honest Mr. James Thornycroft was at the door, bidding a gay and full-hearted welcome to the bridegroom and bride.

What a marriage-day!

## CHAPTER X.

“ARE you quite warm there, Agatha?”

“Yes, thank you, quite warm,” she said, turning round a little, and then turning back. She sat working, or seeming to work, at a large bay-window that fronted the sea at Brighton. Already there had come over her the slight but unmistakeable change which indicates the wife—the girl no longer. She had been married just one week.

Her husband sat at a table writing, as was his habit during the middle of the day, in order that they might walk out in the evening. He had often been thus busy during the

week, even though it was the first week of the honeymoon.

The honeymoon ! How different the word now sounded to Agatha ! Yet she had nothing to complain of. Mr. Harper was very kind ; watchful and tender over her to a degree which she felt even more than she saw. In the mornings he read to her, or talked, chiefly upon subjects higher and withal pleasanter than Agatha had ever heard talked of before ; in the evenings they drove out or walked, till far into the starry summer night. They were together constantly, there never passed between them a quick or harsh word, and yet——

Agatha vainly tried to solve the dim, cloudy “yet,” which had no tangible form, and only arose now that the first bewilderment of her changed existence was settling into reality, and she was beginning to recognise

herself as Agatha Harper, no longer a girl, but a married woman. The sole conclusion she could come to was, that she must be now learning what she supposed every one had to learn—that a honeymoon is not quite the dream of bliss which young people believe in, and that few married couples are quite happy during the first year of their union.

And Mrs. Harper (or Mrs. Locke Harper, as her husband had had printed on the cards, omitting the name which she had once stigmatised as “ugly,”) was probably not altogether wide of the truth, though in this case she judged from mistaken because individual evidence. It is next to impossible that two lives, unless assimilated by strong attachment and rare outward circumstances, if suddenly thrown together, should at once mingle and flow harmoniously on. It takes time, and the influence of perfect love, to

melt and fuse the two currents into one beautiful whole. Perhaps, did all young lovers believe and prepare for this, there would be fewer disappointed and unhappy marriages.

Though sitting at the open window, with the sharp sea-breeze blowing in upon her—it happened to be a sunless and gloomy day—Agatha had answered that she was “quite warm.” Nevertheless her heart felt cold. Not positively sad, yet void. An infinitude of passionate devotion is necessary to make two active human beings content with one another’s sole company for eight entire days, having nothing to occupy them but each other.

Wanting this—yet scarcely conscious of her need—the young wife sat, in her secret soul all shivering and a-cold.

At last, wearied with the long grey sweep of undulating sea, she closed the window.

“I thought the breeze would be too keen for you,” said Mr. Harper, whom her lightest movement always seemed to attract.

“Oh, no ; but I am tired of watching the waves. How melancholy it must be to live here. I have a perfect terror of the sea.”

“Had I known that, I would not have proposed our coming to-day from Leamington to Brighton. But we can leave to-morrow.”

“I did not mean that,” she answered quickly, dreading lest her husband might have thought her speech ungracious or unkind. “We need not go—unless you wish it.”

The bridegroom made no immediate reply ; but there was a melancholy tenderness in his eyes, as, without her knowing it, he sat watching his young wife. At length he rose, and putting her arm in his, stood a long time with her at the window.

“I think, dear Agatha, that you are right. The sea is always sad. How dreary it looks now—like a wide-stretched monotonous life whose ending we see not, yet it must be crossed. How shall we cross it?”

Agatha looked inquiringly.

“The sea I mean,” he continued, with a sudden change of tone. “Shall we go over to France for a week or two?”

“Oh, no”—and she shuddered. “It would kill me with fear to cross the water.”

He looked surprised at her unaccountable repugnance, which she had scarcely expressed than she seemed overpowered by confusion. Her husband forbore to question her further; but the next day told her that he had arranged for their quitting Brighton and making a tour through the west of England, proceeding from thence to London.

“Where—as my brother, or rather my brother’s solicitor, writes me word—some

business about your fortune will require our return in another fortnight. Are you willing, Agatha?"

"Oh yes—quite willing," she cried; for now that her changed life was floating her far away from her old ties, she began to have a yearning for them all.

So the honeymoon dwindled to three weeks, at the close of which Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper were again in London.

It seemed very strange to Agatha to come back to the known places, and roll over the old familiar London stones, and see all things going on as usual; while in herself had come so wide a gap of existence, as if those one-and-twenty days of absence had been one-and-twenty years.

She had become a little more happy lately; a little more used to her new life. And day by day something undefinable began to draw her towards her husband. It was in



fact the dawning spirit of love, which should and might have come before marriage, instead of being, as now, an after-growth. Beneath its influence Nathanael's very likeness altered; his face grew more beautiful, his voice softer. Looking at him now, as he sat by her side, Mr. Harper hardly appeared to her the same man who, returning from the church as her bridegroom, had impressed her with such shrinking awe.

He too was more cheerful. All the long railway journey he had tried to amuse her; the humorous half of his disposition—for Nathanael had, like most good men, a spice of humour about him—coming out as it had never done before. However, as they neared London, he as well as his wife had become rather grave. But when, abruptly turning round, he perceived her earnestly, even tenderly regarding him (at which Agatha

was foolish enough to blush, as if it were a crime to be looking admiringly at one's husband), he melted into a smile.

"Here we are in the old quarters, Agatha. The question is, where shall we go to, since we have no lodgings taken?"

"You should have let me write to Emma, as I wished."

"No," he said, shortly; "it was a pity to trouble her."

"She would not have thought it so, poor dear Emma."

"Were you very intimate with Mrs. Thornycroft? Did you tell her everything in your heart, as women do?"

Agatha was amused by the jealous searching tone and look, so replied carelessly, "Oh yes, all I had to tell—which was not much. I don't deal in mysteries, nor like them. But the chief mystery now

seems to be, where are we to go? If Emma may not be troubled, surely Mrs. Ianson, or your brother——”

“My brother is out of town.”

“Indeed!” And Agatha looked as she felt, neither glad nor sorry, but purely indifferent. Her husband, observing it, became more cheerful.

“Nay, my dear Agatha, you shall not be inconvenienced. We will go first to some quiet lodgings I know of, where Anne Valery always stays when she is in London—though she has returned home now, I think. And afterwards, if you find the evening very dull——”

“Ah!” exclaimed the young wife, smiling a beautiful negative.

“We will go and take a sentimental walk through those very squares we strolled through that night—do you remember?”

“Yes!”

How strange seemed that recollection!—how little she had then thought she was walking with her future husband!

Yet, as a few hours after she trod the well-known ways, with her wifely feelings, sweet and grave, and thought that the arm on which she now leaned was her own through life, Agatha Harper was not unhappy, nor would she for one moment have wished to be again Agatha Bowen.

The next day, by the husband's express desire—the declaring of which was a great act of virtue on his part—word was sent to the Thornycrofts of the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper.

Very trembling, shy, and bewitching the bride sat, waiting for the meeting; and when Emma did really come, very tragico-comic, half pleasure, half tears, was the hearty embrace between the two women. Mr. Harper stood and looked on—he played the young

husband as composedly as he had done the lover and the bridegroom, except for a slight jealous movement as he saw the clinging, the kisses, the tears, which, with the warmth of a heart thrilled by new emotions and budding out into all manner of new tender-nesses, Agatha lavished on her friend.

Yet, whatever he felt, no one could observe but that Nathanael was extremely polite and kind to Mrs. Thornycroft. She on her part admired him extremely—in whispers.

“How well he looks! Really quite changed! No one would ever think of calling him ‘a boy’ now. You must be quite proud of your husband, my dear.”

Agatha smiled, and a light thrill at her heart betrayed its answer. Very soon she ceased to be shy and shame-faced, and sat talking quite at ease, as if she had been Mrs. Locke Harper for at least a year.

Emma Thornycroft was a person not likely to waste much time on the sentimentalities of such a meeting ; she soon dashed into the common-sense questions of what were their plans in London ? and when they would come and dine with herself and “James ?” “Quite friendly. We will ask no one—except of course Major Harper.”

“He is out of town,” said Nathanael.

“What a pity!—Yet, no wonder ; London is so terribly hot now. Is he quite well ?”

“I believe so,” Agatha answered for her husband, who had moved off.

“Because James has met him frequently of late, rushing about the City as pale as a ghost, and looking so miserable. We were afraid something was wrong with him.”

“Oh, I hope not,” exclaimed Agatha.

“My brother is quite well,” Mr. Harper again observed, from his outpost by the

window ; and something in his tone unconsciously checked and changed the conversation.

Whether by Agatha's real inclination, or by some unnoticed influence of Nathanael's, who, gentle as his manners were, through a score of other opposing wills seemed always silently to attain his own, Mrs. Thornycroft's hospitable schemes were overruled. At least, the *venue* was changed from Regent's Park to the Harpers' own temporary home—where, as if by magic, a multitude of small luxuries had already gathered round the young wife. She took all quite naturally, never pausing to think how they came.

It was with a trepidation which had yet its pleasure, that she arrayed herself for this, the first time of her taking her place at the head of her husband's table. She put on a high white gown, which Mr. Harper had once said he liked—she was be-

ginning to be anxious over her dress and appearance now. Glancing into the mirror, there recurred to her mind a speech she had once heard from some foolish matron—"Oh, it does not signify what I wear, or how I look—I'm married!" Agatha thought what a very wrong doctrine that was! and laughed at herself for never having much cared to seem pleasing until she had some one to please. Nay, now for the first time she grumbled at the Pawnee-face, wishing it had been fairer!

But fair or not, when it came timidly and shone over Nathanael's shoulder, he sitting leaning thoughtfully on his hand, the result was such as materially to relieve any womanly doubts about her personal appearance. He kissed her in unwonted, smiling tenderness.

"I like that dress; and your curls"—softly touching them—"your curls fall so prettily.



How well you look, Agatha! Happy too! Is it really so? Are you getting more used to me and my faults, dear?" There was something inexpressibly tender in the way he said "Dear," the only caressing word he ever used.

"Your faults!" re-echoed she in a merry incredulous tone. But before she could say more, the guests most inopportunately arrived. And Agatha, very naturally, darted from her husband to the other side of the room like a flash of lightning.

If the Thornycrofts had expected to find a couple of turtle-doves cooing in a cage, they were certainly disappointed. Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper had apparently settled down into an ordinary husband and wife, resuming serenely their place in society, and behaving towards each other and the world in general just like sensible old married people. Their friends, taking the hint, treated them in like

manner; and thus now and for ever vanished Agatha's honeymoon.

After dinner Emma, anxious about Agatha's proceedings, and still more anxious to have a hand in the same, for she was never happy unless busy about her own or other people's affairs, made inquiries as to the future plans of the young couple.

Agatha could give no answer, for, to her great thankfulness, her husband had hitherto avoided the subject. She looked at him for a reply.

"I think, Mrs. Thornycroft, it will probably be three months before I"—he smilingly corrected himself, and said "*we*—return to Canada."

"Then what do you intend to do meanwhile? Of course, Agatha dear, you will remain in London?"

"Oh yes," she replied, accustomed to decide for herself, and forgetting at the mo-

ment that there was now another to whose decision she was bound to defer. Blushing, she looked towards her husband, who was talking to Mr. Thornycroft. He turned, as indeed he always did when he heard her speaking, but he made no remark, and the "Yes" passed as their mutual assent to Emma's question.

"I know a place that would just suit you," pursued the latter; "that is, if you take a furnished house."

"I should like it much."

"It is but a cottage—rather small, considering your means; by-the-by, Agatha, how close our friend the Major kept all your affairs. No one imagined you were so rich."

"Neither did I, most certainly. But—the cottage."

"The prettiest little place imaginable."

Such a love of a drawing-room! I went there to call on young Northen's sister when she married, last year. Poor thing—sad affair that, my dear.”

“Indeed,” said Agatha, who now felt an interest in all stories of marriages.

“It happened a fortnight ago, soon after your wedding. They quarrelled—she got through a window, and ran away home to her father. It seems she had never cared a straw for her husband, but had married him out of spite, liking some one else better all the time. His own brother, too, they say.”

“What a wicked—wicked thing!” cried Agatha warmly. So warmly that she did not see, close by her chair, her husband—watching her intently, nay, wildly. As she ceased, he drew himself up to his full stature, and stood erect. His countenance

became wonderfully beautiful, altogether glowing.

“ Really, you seem to have comprehended the matter at once,” said Mr. Thornycroft, startled in the winding up of a long harangue about the Corn Laws by the exceeding bright look which his hearer turned towards him.

“ Yes, I think I shall soon comprehend everything,” was the answer, as Mr. Harper placed himself on the arm of his wife’s chair, in the gay attitude of a very boy. She, moving a little, made room for him and smiled. Nay, she even leant silently against his arm, which he had thrown round the back of her chair.

“ Come, Agatha, I want to hear about that wonderful house which your friend is persuading you to take. You know, I happen to have a little concern in the

matter likewise. Have I not, Mr. Thornycroft ?”

“Certainly ; since you have turned out to be that no less wonderful personage which my wife has been perpetually boring me about for the last two years—Agatha’s Husband,” said Mr. Thornycroft, patiently resigning the Corn Laws to their inevitable doom—oblivion.

But Emma, plunging gladly into her native element, discussed the whole house from attic to kitchen. Mr. Harper listened with a complaisant and amused look. Beginning to discern the sterling good there was in the little woman, he passed over her harmless small-mindedness ; knowing well that in the wide-built mansion of human nature there must be always a certain order of beings honourable, useful, and excellent in themselves, to form the basement-story.

The twilight darkened while Emma talked, the faster perhaps that her "James," whose respected presence always restrained her tongue, was discovered to be undeniably asleep. But the young couple were excellent listeners. Nathanael still sat balancing himself on the arm of his wife's chair; his hand having dropped playfully among her curls. He joined with gaiety in all the discussions. More than once, in talking of the various arrangements of their new household, his voice faltered, and the hearts of the husband and wife seemed trembling towards one another.

The conversation ended in Emma's receiving *carte-blanche* to take the house, if practicable, that the Harpers might settle there for three months certain.

"Come, this is better than I expected," cried the worthy little woman. "We shall

be neighbours, and I can teach Agatha house-keeping. She will have a nice little *ménage*, and can give a proper 'At Home,' and charming wedding parties. Shall she not, Mr. Harper?"

"If she wishes."

But Agatha's whispered "No," and kind pressure of the hand, brought to him a most blissful conviction that she did *not* wish, and that she would be, as she said, "happier living quietly at home." *Home!* what a word of promise that sounded in both their ears!

When the lights came, Mr. Thornycroft woke up; with many apologies, poor man; only, as his wife said, "Everybody knew how hard James worked, and how tired he was at night." The two gentlemen fraternised once more. They began one of those general arguments on the history of the times, which when spoken are intensely interesting, and



being written, as intensely prosy. The ladies listened in a most wife-like and pleased submission.

“How well my husband talks—doesn’t he?” whispered Emma, with sparkling eyes.

Agatha agreed, and indeed Mr. Thornycroft’s strong sense and acute judgment were patent to every one. But when Mr. Harper spoke, his clear views on every point, his trenchant but pleasant wit, by which he rounded off the angularities of argument, and above all his keen, far-seeing intellect, which dived into wondrous depths of knowledge, and invariably brought something precious to light—these things were to the young wife a positive revelation.

She sat attentive, beginning to learn what strange to say was no pain—her own ignorance, and her husband’s superior wisdom. She had never before felt at once so proud and humble.

When the Thornycrofts departed, and Mr. Harper returned up-stairs from bidding them good-by, he found his wife in a thoughtful mood.

“Well, dear, have you had a pleasant evening? Are you content with our plans?”

“Yes—indeed, more so than I deserve. Oh, how good you are!” she whispered; and her shortcomings towards him grew into a great burden of regret.

“Hush!” he answered, smiling; “we will not begin discussing one another’s goodness, or you know the subject would be interminable. And I would like us to hold a little serious consultation before to-morrow. You are not sleepy?”

“No.”

“Stretch yourself out on the sofa, and let me sit beside you. There—are you quite comfortable?”

“Ah, yes,” she said, and thought for the

hundredth time how sweet it was to have some one to take care of her.

“Now, my wife, listen! You seemed to long for that cottage very much, and you shall have it. Nay, you ought, because at present you are the rich lady; while I, so long as I remain in England, receive none of my salary from Montreal, and am, comparatively speaking, poor. In fact, nothing but that very secondary character, ‘Agatha’s Husband.’”

Though he laughed, there was a little jarring bitterness in this confession; but Agatha was too simple to notice it. He continued quickly:

“Nevertheless, this position is only temporary; I shall be quite your equal in Canada.”

“In Canada!” she echoed dolefully. “Oh, surely—surely we need not go?”

“Are you in earnest, Agatha?”

“I am indeed,” said she, gathering up

courage to speak to him of what ever since her marriage had been growing an inexpressible dread.

“Why so?”

“I—I am afraid to tell.”

“Shall *I* tell you? You cannot bear to leave your old friends? You fear to go into a new country, entirely among strangers, with only your husband?”

His suddenly suspicious tone stopped the frank denial that was bursting to his wife's lips. She only said, a little hurt, “If that were true, I would have told you. I always speak exactly what I think.”

“Is it so? is it indeed so?” he cried, with a lightening of countenance as sudden as its shade. “Oh, Agatha, forgive me;” and his heart seemed melting before her. “I am not good to you—but you do not quite understand me yet.”

“I feel that. Yet what can I do?”

“Nothing! Only wait. I will try to cure myself without paining you. But, for the sake of our whole life’s happiness, henceforward always be open with me, Agatha! Don’t hide from me anything! Set your frank goodness against my wicked suspiciousness, and make me ashamed of myself, as now.”

He had not spoken so freely or with so much emotion since they were married; and his wife was deeply touched. She made no answer, but half raising herself, crept to his arms, almost as if she loved him. So she truly did, in a measure, though not with the spontaneous, self-existent love, which, once lit in a woman’s breast, is like the central fire hidden in the earth’s bosom, enduring through all surface variations—through summer and winter, earthquakes, floods, and storms—utterly unchangeable and indestructible. And, however wildly extravagant this

simile may sound—however rare the fact it illustrates, nevertheless such Love is a great truth, possible and probable, which has existed and may exist—thank God for it!—to prove that He did not found the poetry of all humanity upon a beautiful deceit.

Something of this mystery was beginning to stir in the wife's heart; the girl-wife, married before her character was half formed—before the perfecting of love, which taking, as all feelings must, the impress of individual nature, was in her of slow development.

As Agatha lay, her head buried in her husband's neck, guessing out of her own heart something of what was passing in his, there came to her the first longing after that oneness of spirit, without which marriage is but a false or base union, legal and sanctified before men, but, oh! how unholy in the sight of God!

The young wife felt as if now, and not

until now, she could unfold to her husband all the secrets of her heart, all its foolishness, ignorance, and fears.

“If you will listen to me, and not despise me very much, I will tell you something that I have never told to any one until now.”

She could not imagine why, but at this soft whisper he trembled; however, he bade her go on.

“You wonder why it is I am so terrified at leaving England? It is not for any of the reasons you said, but for one so foolish that I am half ashamed to confess it. I dare not cross the sea.”

“Is that all?” Mr. Harper cried, and the unutterable dread which had actually blanched his cheek disappeared instantaneously. He felt himself another man.

“Wait, and I’ll tell you why this is,” continued Agatha. “When I was a little child,

somewhere about four years old, I was at some seaport town—I don't know where—I never did, for there was no one with me but my nurse, and she died soon after. One day, I remember being in a little boat going to see a large ship. There were other people with us, especially one lady. Somehow, playing with her, I fell overboard." Here Agatha shuddered involuntarily. "It may be very ridiculous, but even now, when I am ill or restless in mind, I constantly dream over again that horrible drowning."

Her husband drew her closer to him, murmuring, "Poor child!"

"Ah, I was indeed a poor child! When, after being brought to life again—for I fancy I must have been nearly dead—my nurse forbade me ever to speak of what had happened, no one can tell into what a terror it grew. I never shall overcome it, never! The very



sight of the sea is more than I can bear. To cross it—to be on it——”

“Hush, dear, quiet yourself,” said her husband, soothingly. “Now, tell me all you can remember.”

“Scarcely anything more, except that when I came to myself I was lying on the beach, with the stranger lady by me.”

“Who was she?”

“I have not the slightest idea. Being so young, I recollect little about her—in fact, only one thing: that just as she was leaving me to go on in the little boat, my nurse called out, ‘We are all too late; the ship is gone!’ and the lady fell flat down where she stood—dead, as I thought then. They carried me away, and I never saw or heard of her again.”

“How strange!”

“But,” continued Agatha, gathering courage as she found her husband did not smile

at her folly, and beginning to speak with him more freely than she had ever done with any person in her life, "but you have no idea the impression the circumstance left on my mind. For years I made of this lady—to whom I feel sure I owed in some way or other the saving of my life—a sort of guardian angel. I believe I even prayed to her—such a queer, foolish child I was—oh, so foolish!"

"Very likely, dear; we all are," said Mr. Harper, gaily. "And you are quite sure you never saw your angel?"

"No, nor any one like her. The person most like, and yet very unlike, too, in some things, was—don't laugh, please—was Miss Valery. That, I fancy, was the reason why I liked her so from the first, and was ready to do anything she bade me."

"Then when you consented to marry me it was only for love of Anne Valery?" And

beneath Nathanael's smile lingered a little sad earnest.

His wife did not answer—even yet she was too shy to say the words, “I love you.” But she took his hand, and reverently kissed it, whispering :

“I am quite content. I would not have things otherwise than they are. And all I mean by telling such a long foolish story is this :—teach me how to conquer myself and my fears, and I will go with you anywhere—even across the sea.”

“My own dear wife.” His voice was quite broken ; so sudden, so unexpected was this declaration from her, and by the tremblings which shook her all the while he saw how great her struggle had been.

For many minutes, holding her little head on his arm, the young husband sat silent, buried in deep thought ; Agatha never saw the changes, bitter, fierce, sorrowful, that

by turns swept over the face under which her own lay so calmly, with sweet shut eyes. Strange difference between the woman and the man.

“Agatha,” he said at last, “I have quite decided.”

“Decided what?”

“That I will give up my office at Montreal, and we will live in England.”

She was so astonished that at first she could not speak; then she burst into joyful tears, and hung about him, murmuring unutterable thanks. For the moment he felt as if this reward made his sacrifice nothing, and yet it had cost him almost everything that his manly pride held dear.

“Then you will not go? You will never cross the terrible Atlantic again?” cried Agatha.

“I do not promise that; for I must go, soon or late, if only to persuade Uncle Brian

to return with me to England. — Uncle Brian! what will he say when he learns that I have given up my independence, and am living pensioner on a rich wife," muttered the young man bitterly.

"But," continued he, trying to make a jest of the matter, "though I do renounce my income in the New World, I am not going to live an idler on your little ladyship's bounty. I intend to work hard at anything that I can find to do. And it will be strange if, in this wide, busy England, I cannot turn to some honourable profession. By Heaven! I'd rather go into the fields and chop wood with this right hand——"

And suddenly dashing it down on the table, he startled Agatha very much; so much that she again clung to him, and innocently begged him not to be angry with her.

Then, once more, Nathanael took her in

his arms, and became calm in calming her. Thus they sat, until the silence grew heavenly between the two, and it seemed as if in this new confidence, and in the joy of mutual self-renunciation, were beginning that true marriage which makes of husband and wife not only "one flesh," but one soul.

## CHAPTER XI.

It had been arranged with Emma Thornycroft that Mrs. Harper should take the benefit of that lady's superior domestic and worldly experience—for Agatha herself was a perfect child—and that they two should go over the intended house together. Accordingly, in the course of the following day Mrs. Thornycroft appeared—very business-like—to carry away the young wife, and give her her first lesson in household responsibilities.

From this important business Mr. Harper was laughingly excluded, as being only a “gentleman,” and required merely to pro-

nounce a final decision upon the niceties of feminine choice.

“In fact,” said Emma, gaily assuming the autocracy of her sex, “husbands ought to have nothing at all to do with house-choosing or house-keeping, except to pay the rent and the bills.”

Agatha could not help laughing at this, until she saw that Mr. Harper was silent.

A few minutes before they started he took his wife aside, and showed her a letter. It was the formal renunciation of the appointment he held at Montreal.

“How kind!” she cried, in unfeigned delight. “And how quickly you have fulfilled your promise!”

“When I have once decided I always do the thing immediately and irremediably. This letter shall go to-day.”

“Ah!—let me post it,” whispered Agatha, taking a wilful, childish pleasure in thus de-



molishing every chance of the future she had so dreaded.

“What! cannot you yet trust me?” returned her husband. “Nay, there is no fear. What is done, is done. But you shall have your way.”

And walking with them a little distance, he suffered Agatha with her own hands to post the decisive letter.

After he left them, she told Mrs. Thornycroft the welcome news, enlarging upon Mr. Harper's goodness in resigning so much for her sake.

“Resigning?” said Emma, laughing. “Well, I don't see much noble resignation in a young man's giving up a hard-working situation in the colonies to live at ease on his wife's property in England. My dear, husbands always like to make the most of their little sacrifices. You mustn't believe half they say.”

“My husband never said one word of his,” cried Agatha, rather indignantly, and repented herself of her frankness to one whose ideas now more than ever jarred with her own. ‘Three weeks’ constant association with a man like Nathanael had lifted her mind above the ordinary standard of womanhood to which Emma belonged. She began to half believe the truth of what she had once with great astonishment heard Anne Valery declare—ay, even Anne Valery—that if the noblest moral type of man and of woman were each placed side by side, the man would be the greater of the two.

But this thought she kept fondly to herself, and suffered Emma to talk on without much attending to her conversation. It was chiefly about some City business with which “her James” had been greatly annoyed of late—having to act for a friend who had been ruined by taking shares in a bubble

company formed to work a Cornish mine. Agatha had often been doomed to listen to such historiettes. Mrs. Thornycroft had a great fancy for putting her harmless fingers in her husband's business matters, for which the chief apology, in her friend's eyes, was the good little wife's great interest in all that concerned "my James." So Agatha had got into a habit of listening with one ear, saying, "Yes," "No," and "Certainly;" while she thought of other things the while. This habit she to-day revived, and pondered vaguely over many pleasant fancies while hearing mistily of certain atrocities perpetrated by "City scoundrels"—Emma was always warm in her epithets.

"The 'Company,' my dear, is a complete take-in—all sham names, secretaries, treasurers, and even directors. The whole affair was got up among two or three people in a

lawyer's office; and who do you think that lawyer is, Agatha?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Harper, feeling perfectly indifferent, even if he were the man in the moon.

"I am not sure that I ought to tell you, for James only found it out, or rather guessed it, this morning at breakfast-time. And if the thing can only be proved, it will go very suspiciously against the people who have been mixed up in the affair, and especially against this Mr. Grimes.—There, I declare I've let the cat out of the bag at last, for all James cautioned me not!"

"Well, be content," said Agatha, awaking from a reverie as to how many days her husband intended to stay at Kingcombe Holm, whither they were this week going on a formal invitation, and whether the new house would be quite ready on their return

—"Be content, Emma; I really did not catch the name."

"I'm glad of it," said the gossiping little woman—though she looked extremely sorry. "Of course, if Major Harper had known—why, you would have heard."

"Heard what?" asked Agatha, her curiosity at last attracted by her brother-in-law's name. But now Emma seemed wilfully bent upon maintaining a mysterious silence.

"That's exactly what I can't tell you, my dear, except thus much—that my husband is afraid Major Harper has been losing a good deal of money, since more than two-thirds of the shares in Wheal Caroline were in his name, and now the vein has failed—that is, if there ever was a vein or a mine at all—and the other shareholders declare there has been a great deal of cheating somewhere—and—you understand."

Agatha did not understand one jot. All she drew from this confused volubility was the fact that Major Harper had somehow lost money, for which she was very sorry. But to her utter ignorance of financial or business matters the term "losing money" bore very little meaning. However, she recurred with satisfaction to her own reputed wealth, and thought if Major Harper were in any need he would of course tell his brother, and she and Nathanael could at once supply what he wanted. She determined to speak to her husband the first opportunity, and so dismissed the subject, as being not half so interesting as that of "the new house."

At the gate of this the two ladies now stood, and Emma, with a matronly importance, introduced the gratified young wife to all its perfections.

If there be one instinct that lurks in a woman's breast, ready to spring up when

touched, and bloom into all sorts of beautiful and happy feelings, it is the sense of home—of pleasant domestic sway and domestic comfort—the looking forward to “a house of one’s own.” Many ordinary girls marry for nothing but this; and in the nobler half of their sex even amidst the strongest and most romantic personal attachment there is a something—a vague, dear hope, that, flying beyond the lover and the bridegroom, nestles itself in the husband and the future home.—The home as well as the husband, since it is given by him, is loved for his sake, and made beautiful for his comfort, while he is the ruler, the guide, and the centre of all.

Mrs. Harper, as she went through the rooms of this, the first house she had ever looked on with an eye of interest, admiring some things, objecting to others, and beginning to arrange and decide in her own mind,—felt the

awakening of that feeling which philosophers call "the domestic instinct"—the instinct which makes of women good wives, fond mothers, and wise mistresses of pleasant households. She wondered that, as Agatha Bowen, she had thought so little of these things.

"Yes," said she, brightening up as she listened to Emma's long-winded discourse upon furniture and arrangements, and learning for the first time to appreciate the capital good sense of that admirable domestic oracle and young housekeeper's guide—"Yes, I think this will just do. And, as you say, we can easily manage to buy it, furniture and all, so as to make what improvements we choose. Oh, how delicious it will be to have a house of one's own!"

And the tears almost came into her eyes at thought of that long vista of future joy—the years which might pass in this same dwelling.



“My husband,” she said to the person who showed them over the place—and her cheeks glowed, and her heart dilated with a tender pride as she used the word—“my husband will come to-morrow and make his decision. I think there is very little doubt but that we shall take the house.”

So anxious was she to conclude the matter and let Mr. Harper share in all her pleasant feelings, that she excused herself from staying at Emma's until he came to fetch her, and determined to walk back to meet him.

“What, with nobody to take care of you?” said Emma.

“The idea of anybody's taking care of me! We never thought of such a thing three months ago. I used to come and go everywhere at my own sweet will, you know,” laughed Agatha. Nevertheless, it was a sweet thought that there *was* somebody to

take care of her. Her high spirit was beginning to learn that there are dearer pleasures in life than even the pleasure of independence.

Pondering on these things—and also on the visit to Kingcombe Holm which her husband had that morning decided—she walked through the well-known squares, her eyes and her veil lowered, her light springy step restrained into matronly dignity. Agatha had a wondrous amount of dignity for such a little woman. Her gait, too, had in it something very peculiar—a mixture of elasticity, decision, and pride. Her small figure seemed to rise up airily between each footpress, as if unaccustomed to creep. There was a trace of wildness in her motions; hers was anything but a dainty tread or a lazy drawing-room glide; it was a bold, free Indian-like walk—a footstep of the wilderness.

No one who had once known her could ever mistake Agatha, be she seen ever so far

off; and as she went on her way, a gentleman, crossing hastily from the opposite side of the square, saw her, started, and seemed inclined to shrink from recognition. But she, attracted by his manner, lifted up her eyes, and soon put an end to his uncertainty. Though a good deal surprised by the suddenness of the *rencontre*, there was no reason on earth why Mrs. Harper should not immediately go up and speak to her husband's brother.

She did so, holding out her hand frankly.

Major Harper's response was hesitating to a painful degree. He looked, in the common but expressive phrase, "as if he had seen a ghost."

"Who would have thought of meeting you here, Miss Bowen—Mrs. Harper I mean?" he added, seeing her smile at the already strange sound of her maiden name. What could have possessed Major Harper to be guilty of such uncourteous forgetfulness?

“ You evidently did not think I was my real self, or you would not have been going to pass me by ; I—that is, *we*”—at the word Nathanael’s wife cast off her shyness, and grew bravely dignified—“ we came back to London two days ago.”

“ Indeed !”

“ Your brother,”—she had not yet quite the courage to say “ my husband,” when speaking of him, especially to Frederick Harper—“ your brother thought you were out of town.”

“ I ?—yes—no. No, it was a mistake. But are you not going in ? Good morning !”

In his confusion of mind he was handing her up the steps of Dr. Ianson’s door, which they were just passing. Agatha drew back ; at first surprised, then alarmed. His strange manner, his face, not merely pale but ghastly, the suppressed agitation of his whole aspect, seemed forewarnings of some ill. It was her first consciousness that she was no longer

alone, in herself including alike all her pleasure and all her pain.

“ Oh, tell me,” she cried, catching his arm, “ is there anything the matter? Where is my husband ?”

The quick fear, darting arrow-like to her heart, betrayed whose image lay there nearest and dearest now. Major Harper looked at her, looked and—sighed !

“ Don't be afraid,” he said kindly ; “ all is well with your husband, for aught I know. He is a happy fellow in having some one in the world to be alarmed on his account.”

Agatha blushed deeply, but made no reply. She took her brother-in-law's offered arm, offered with a mechanical courtesy that survived the great discomposure of mind under which he evidently laboured, and turned with him towards home. She was at once puzzled and grieved to see the state he was in, which,

deny it and disguise it as he would—and he tried hard to do so—was quite clear to her womanly perception. His laugh was hollow, his step hurried, his eyes wandering from side to side as if he were afraid of being seen. How different from his old cheerful lounge, full of a good-natured conceit, apparently content with himself, and willing that the whole street should gaze their fill at Major Frederick Harper.

So old he looked, too ; as if the moment his merry mask of smiles was thrown off, the cruel lurking wrinkles appeared. Agatha pitied him, and felt a return of the old liking, warm and kind, such as it was before the inuendoes of foolish friends had first lured her to distrust the nature of her own innocent feelings and then changed them into positive contempt and aversion.

She said, with an air of gentle matronly

freedom, half sisterly, too, and wholly different from the shy manner of Agatha Bowen to Major Harper :

“ You must come home with me. I fear you are ill, or in anxiety. Why did you not tell your brother ?” And suddenly she thought of Emma’s statement of the morning. But Agatha, in her unworldliness, never supposed such a trivial loss as that of money could make any man so miserable as Major Harper seemed.

“ I ill ? I anxious ? I tell my brother ?” he repeated, sharply.

“ Nay, as you will. Only do come to us. He will be so glad to see you.”

“ Glad to see me !” He again repeated her words, as though he had none of his own, or were too bewildered to use them. Nevertheless, through a certain playful influence which Agatha could exert when she liked,

making almost everybody yield to her, Major Harper suffered himself to be led along ; his companion talking pleasantly to him the while, lest he might think she noticed his discomposure.

Arrived at home, they found that Nathanael had walked to the Regent's Park to fetch his wife, according to agreement.

Mrs. Harper looked sorry. She had already learned one little secret of her husband's character—his dislike to any unpunctuality, any altered plans or broken promises. "Still, you must come in and wait for him."

"Wait for whom?" said Major Harper, absently.

"Your brother."

"My brother!—I, wait to see my brother! Impossible—I—I'll write. Good morning—good morning."

He was leaving the hall—more hurried



and agitated than ever—when Mrs. Harper, now really concerned, laid her hand upon his arm.

“I will not let you go. Come in, and tell me what ails you.”

The soft whisper, the eyes of genuine compassion—womanly compassion only, without any love—were more than Major Harper could resist.

“I will go,” he muttered. “Better tell it to you than to my brother.” And he followed her up-stairs.

The cool shadow of the room seemed to quiet his excitement ; he drank a glass of water that stood by, and became more like himself.

“Well, my dear young lady,” he said, with some return of the paternal manner of old times, “when did you come back to London?”

“Two days since, as I told you. And, as you will soon hear, your brother's plans are all changed—we are going to live in London.”

“To live in London?”

“He has given up his appointment at Montreal. We have taken a house, or shall take it to-day, and settle here. He intends entering at the bar, or something of the sort; but you must persuade him not. What is the use of his toiling, when I—that is we—are so rich?”

While Agatha thus talked, chiefly to amuse her brother-in-law and make him feel that she was really his sister, one and the same in family interests—while she talked, she was astonished to see Major Harper's face overspread with blank dismay.

“And—Nathanael has really given up his appointment?”

“He has, and for my sake. Was it not good of him?”

“It was madness! Nay—it is I that have been the madman—it is I that have done it all. Agatha, forgive me! But no—you never can!”

As they stood together by the fireplace he snatched her hand, gazing down upon her with unutterable remorse.

“Poor Bowen’s daughter that he trusted to me! Such a mere child too! Oh, forgive me, Agatha!”

She thought some extraordinary delusion had come upon him—perhaps the forerunner of some dreadful illness. She tried to take her hand away, though kindly, for she firmly believed him to be delirious. Nothing could really have happened to herself that Mr. Harper did not know. With him to take care of her, she was quite safe. And in that moment

—for all passed in a moment—Nathanael's wife first felt how implicitly she was beginning to put her trust in him.

While she remained thus—her hand still closed tightly in her brother-in-law's grasp, half terrified, yet trying not to show her terror—the door opened, and her husband entered.

At first Mr. Harper seemed petrified with amazement ; then a torrent of dumb fury swept over him. Crossing the room, he laid a heavy hand on his brother's shoulder :

“Frederick, you forget yourself; this is my wife.—Agatha?”

The searching agony of that one word, as he turned and looked her full in the face, was unutterable. She scarcely perceived it.

“Oh, I am so glad you are come,” was all she said. He drew her to his side—indeed, she had sprang there of her own accord—

and wrapped his arms tightly round her, as if to show that she was his possession, his own property.

“ Now, brother, whatever you wished to say to my wife, say it to us both.”

Major Harper could not speak.

“ He was waiting to see you ; he is ill—very ill, I think,” whispered Agatha to her husband. “ Shall I leave you together?”

“ Yes,” he answered, releasing her, but only to draw her back again, with the same wildly-questioning look, the meaning of which was to her innocence quite inexplicable.—“ My wife?”

“ My dear husband !”

At that whisper, which burst from her full heart in the comfort of seeing him and of knowing that he would take on himself the burden of all her anxiety, Nathanael let her go. She crept away, most thankful to get

out of the room, and leave Major Harper safe in his brother's hands.

But when a quarter of an hour—half an hour—passed by, and still the two gentlemen remained shut up together, without sending for her to join their conference, or, as she truly expected, to tell her that poor Major Harper must be taken home in the delirium of a brain fever—Agatha began rather to wonder at the circumstance.

She apprehended no evil, for her even course of existence had never been crossed by those sudden tragedies, the impression of which no one ever entirely overcomes, which teach us to walk trembling along the ways of life, lest each moment a gulf should open at our feet. Agatha had read of such misfortunes, but believed them only in books; to her the real world and her own fate therein

appeared the most monotonous thing imaginable. It never entered her mind to create an adventure or a mystery.

She waited another fifteen minutes—until the clock struck five, and the servant came up to her to announce dinner, and to know whether the same information should be conveyed to the gentlemen in the drawing-room. Servants seem instinctively to guess when there is something extraordinary going on in a house, and the maid—as she found her mistress sitting in her bed-chamber, alone and thoughtful—wore a look of curiosity, which made Mrs. Harper colour.

“Go down and tell your master—no, stay, I will go myself.”

She waited until the maid had disappeared, and then went down-stairs, but stopped at the drawing-room door, on hearing within loud voices, at least one voice—Major Harper's.

He seemed pleading or protesting vehemently. Agatha might almost have distinguished the words, but—and the fact is much to her credit, since, her brother-in-law's apparently sane tones having suppressed her fears, she was now smitten with very natural curiosity—but she stopped her ears, and ran up-stairs again. There she remained, waiting for a lull in the dispute—in which, however, she never caught one tone of Nathanael's.

At last, feeling rather humiliated at being thus obliged to flutter up and down the stairs of her own abode, and crave admittance into her own drawing-room, Mrs. Harper ventured to knock softly, and enter.

Frederick Harper was sitting on the sofa, his head crushed down upon his hands. Nathanael stood at a little distance, by the fireplace. The attitude of the elder brother in-



licated deep humiliation, that of the younger was freezing in its sternness. Agatha had never seen such an expression on Nathanael's face before.

"What did you want?" he said abruptly, thinking it was the servant who entered.

She could not imagine what made him start so, nor what made the two brothers look at her so guiltily. The fact left a very uncomfortable impression on her mind.

"I only came——" she began.

"No matter, dear." Her husband walked up to her, speaking in a low voice, studiously made kind, she thought. "Go away now—we are engaged, you see."

"But dinner," she added. "Will not your brother stay and dine with us?"

Major Harper turned with an imploring look to his brother's wife.

"No," said Mr. Harper, emphatically ;

held the door open for Agatha to retire, and closed it after her. Never in all her life had she been treated so unceremoniously.

The newly-married wife returned to her room, her cheeks burning with no trifling displeasure. She began to feel the tightening pressure of that chain with which her life was now eternally bound.

But, after five minutes of silent reflection, she was too sensible to nourish serious indignation at being sent out of the room like a mere child. There must have been some good reason, which Mr. Harper would surely explain when his brother left. The whole conversation was probably some personal affair of the Major's, with which she had nothing to do. Yet why did her brother-in-law regard her so imploringly? It was, after all, rather extraordinary. So, genuine female curiosity getting the better of her, never did Blue Beard's

Fatima watch with greater anxiety for "anybody coming" than did Agatha Harper watch at her window for somebody going—viz., Major Harper. She was too proud to listen, or to keep any other outpost, and sat with her chamber-door resolutely closed.

At length her vigil came to an end. She saw her late guardian passing down the street—not hastily or in humiliation, but with his usual measured step and satisfied air. Nay, he even crossed over the way to speak to an acquaintance, and stood smiling, talking, and swinging his cane. There could not be anything very wrong, then.

Agatha thought, having been once sent out of the room, she would not re-enter it until her husband fetched her—a harmless ebullition of annoyance. So she stood idly before the mirror, ostensibly arranging her curls, though in reality seeing nothing but listening

with all her ears for the one footstep—which did not come. Not, alas ! for many, many minutes.

She was still standing motionless, though her brows were knitted in deep thought, and her mouth had assumed the rather cross expression which such rich, rare lips always can, and which only makes their smiling the more lovely—when she saw in the mirror another reflection beside her own.

Her husband had come softly behind her, and put his arms round her waist.

“Did you think I was a long time away from you? I could not help it, dear. Let us go down-stairs now.”

Agatha was surprised that in spite of all the tenderness of his manner, he did not attempt the slightest explanation. And still more surprised was she to find her own questions, wonderings, reproaches, dying away

unuttered in the atmosphere of silentness which always seemed to surround Nathanael Harper. This silentness had from the very beginning of their acquaintance induced in her that faint awe, which is the most ominous yet most delicious feeling that a woman can have towards a man. It seems an instinctive acknowledgment of the much-condemned, much-perverted, yet divine and unalterable law given with the first human marriage—  
“ *He shall rule over thee.*”

After all that Agatha had intended to say, she said—nothing. She only turned her face to her husband, and received his kiss. Very soft it was—even cold—as though he dared not trust himself to the least expression of feeling. He merely whispered, “Now, come down with me ;” and she went.

But on the staircase she could not forbear saying, “I thought you two would never have

done talking. Is it anything very serious? I trust not, since your brother walked down the street so cheerfully."

"Did he? — and — were you watching him?"

"Yes indeed," returned Agatha, innocently, for she had no notion of doing anything that she would be afterwards ashamed to confess. "But what put him into such a state of mind, and made him behave to me so strangely?"

"How did he behave?" asked the husband, with quickness, then stopped. "Forgive me. You know, I have never inquired—I never shall inquire."—Again he paused, seeing how his mood alarmed her. His violence melted into compassion. "Do not be afraid of me! Poor child—poor little Agatha!"

Waiting for no reply, he led her in to dinner.

While the servants waited, Mr. Harper

scarcely spoke, except when necessary. Only in his lightest word addressed to Agatha was a certain tremulousness—in his most careless look a constant tender observance, which soothed her mind, and quite removed from thence the impression of his hasty and incomprehensible words. She laid all to the charge of Major Harper and his business.

At dessert, Nathanael sat varying his long silences with a few commonplace remarks which showed how oblivious he was of all around him, and how sedulously he tried to disguise the fact, and rise to the surface of conversation. Agatha's curiosity returned, not unmingled with a feeling tenderer, more woman-like, more wife-like, which showed itself in stray peeps at him from under the lashes of her brown eyes. At length she took courage to say, lightening the question by a jest :

“Now—since we seem to have nothing to talk about, will you tell me what you and your brother were plotting together, that you kept poor little me out of the room so long?”

“Plotting together? Surely, Agatha, you did not mean to use that word?”

She had used it according to a habit she had of putting a jesting form of phrase upon matters where she was most in earnest. She was amazed to see her husband take it so seriously.

“Well, blot out the offending word, and put in any other you choose; only tell me?”

“Why do you wish to know, little Curiosity?” said he, recovering himself, and eagerly catching the tone his wife had adopted.

“Why? Because I am a little Curiosity, and like to know everything.”

“That is both presumptuous and impos-



sible, your ladyship! If one half the world were always bent on knowing all the secrets of the other half, what a very uncomfortable world it would be."

"I do not see that, even if one half included the wives, and the other half the husbands; which is apparently what you mean to imply."

"I shall not plead guilty to anything by implication."

They went on a few moments longer in this skirmish of assumed gaiety, when Agatha, pausing, leant her elbows on the table, and looked seriously at her husband.

"Do you know we are two very foolish people?"

"Wherefore?"

"We are pretending to make idle jests, when all the time we are both of us very much in earnest."

“That is true!” And he sighed, though within himself, as though he did not wish her to hear it. “Agatha, come over to me.” He held out both his hands; she came, and placed herself beside him, all her jesting subdued. She even trembled, at the expectation of something painful or sorrowful to be told. But her husband said nothing—except to ask if she would like to go anywhere this evening?

Agatha felt annoyed. “Why do you put me off in this manner, when I know you have something on your mind?”

“Have I?” he said, half-mournfully.

“Then tell it to me.”

“Nay. Often it is wisest, kindest, for a man to bear the burden of his own cares.”

Nathanael had spoken in his most gentle tone, and slowly, as if impelled to what he said by hard necessity. He was not pre-

pared to see the sudden childish burst of astonishment, anger, and resistance.

“ From this, I understand, what you might as well have said plainly, that I am not to inquire what passed between you and your brother ?”

He moved his head in assent, and then sunk it on his left hand, holding out the other to his wife, as though talking were impossible to him, and all he wished were silence and peace. Agatha was too angry for either.

“ But if I do not choose at nineteen to be treated like a mere child—if I ask, nay, *insist*——” She hesitated, lest the last word might have irritated him too far. Vague fears concerning the full meaning of the word “ obey” in the marriage-service rushed into her mind.

Nathanael sat motionless, his fingers pressed upon his eyelids. This silence was worse than any words.

“ Mr. Harper !”

“ I hear.” And the grave, sad eyes—sad without any displeasure—were turned upon her. Agatha felt a sting of conscience.

“ I did not mean to speak rudely to my husband ; but I had my own reasons for inquiring about Major Harper, from something Emma said to-day.”

“ What was that ?”

“ How eager you look ! Nay, I can keep a secret too. But no, I will not.” And the generous impulse burst out, even accompanied by a few childish tears and childish blushes. “ She told me he had probably lost money. I wished to say that if such a trifle made him unhappy he might take as much as he liked of mine. That was all !”

Her husband regarded her with mingled emotions, which at last all melted into one—deep tenderness. “ And you would do this, even for him ? Thank God ! I never doubted

your goodness, Agatha. And I *trusted* you always."

Wondering, yet half-pleased, to see him so moved, Agatha received his offered hand. "Then all is settled. Now, tell me everything that passed between you."

"I cannot."

Gentle as the tone was, there was something in it which implied that to strive with Nathanael's firm resolve would be like beating against a marble wall. A great terror came over Agatha—she, who had lived like a wild bird, knowing no stronger will than her own. Then all the combativeness of her nature, hitherto dormant because she had known none worthy to contend against, awoke up, and tempted her to struggle fiercely with her chain.

She unloosed her hands—nay, writhed them out of his hold—and sprung from

him. "Mr. Harper, you are teaching me early how men rule their wives."

"I only ask mine to trust me. She would, if she knew how great was the sacrifice."

"What sacrifice? How many more mysteries am I to be led through blindfold?"

And her crimson cheek, her quick, wild step across the room, showed a new picture to the husband's eyes—a picture that all young wives should be slow to unveil, for the first sight is often that of future doom.

Nathanael drew his hand across his brow—was it to shut out that vision?—then spoke, steadily, sorrowfully:

"We have scarcely been married a month. Are we beginning to be angry with one another already?"

She made him no answer.

"Will you listen to me—if for only two minutes?"

She felt his step approaching, his hand fastening on hers, and replacing her in her chair. Resistance was impossible.

“Agatha, had I trusted you less than I do, I might easily have put off your questions, or told you what was false. I shall do neither. I shall tell you truth.”

“That is all I wish.”

Nathanael said, with a visible effort, “To-day I learnt from my brother several rather painful circumstances—some which I was ignorant of—one”—his voice grew cold and hard—“one which I already knew, and knew to be irremediable.”

His wife looked much alarmed ; seeing it, he forced a smile.

“But what is irremediable can and must be borne. I can bear things better, perhaps, than most people. The other cares may be removed by time and—silence. To that end

I have promised Frederick to keep his confidence secret from every one, even from my own wife, for a year to come. A sacrifice harder than you think ; but it must be made, and I have made it."

Agatha turned away, saying bitterly : " Your wife ought to thank you! She was not aware until now how wondrously well you loved your brother."

There was a heavy silence, and then Mr. Harper said, in a hoarse voice, " Did you ever hear the story of a man who plunged into a river to save the life of an enemy, and when asked why he did it, answered, ' It was because he *was* an enemy ?' "

" I do not understand you," cried Agatha.

" No"—her husband returned hastily—" nor does it signify that you should. A foolish story, without any meaning. What were we talking about?"



He—when her heart was bursting with vexation and wounded feeling—he pretended to treat all so lightly that he did not even remember what they were saying! It was more than Agatha could endure.

Had he been irritated like herself—had he shown annoyance, pain—had they even come to a positive quarrel—for love will sometimes quarrel, and take comfort therein—it would have been less trying to a girl of her temperament. But that grave superior calm of unvarying kindness—her poor angry spirit beat against it like waves against a shining rock.

“We were talking of what, had I considered the matter a month ago, I might possibly have saved myself the necessity of discussing or practising—a wife’s blind obedience to her husband.”

“Agatha!”

"When I married," she recklessly pursued, "I did not think what I was doing. It is hard enough blindly to obey even those whom one has known long—trusted long—loved long—but you——"

"I understand." His head dropped between his hands. "Hush! there needs not another word."

Agatha began to hesitate. She had only wished to make him feel—to shake him from that rigid quietude which to her was so trying. She had not intended to wound him so.

"Are you angry with me?" she asked at length.

"No, not angry. No reproaches can be more bitter than my own."

She was just about to ask him what he meant—nay, she even considered whether her woman's pride might not stoop to draw

aside the tight-pressed hands, entreating him to look up and forgive her and love her,—when in burst Mrs. Thornycroft.

“Oh—so glad to catch you—have not a minute to spare, for James is waiting. Where is your husband?”

Mr. Harper had risen, and stood in the shadow, where his face was not easily visible. Agatha wondered to see him so erect and calm, while her own cheeks were burning, and every word she tried to utter she had to gulp down a burst of tears.

“Mr. Harper, it was you I wanted—to ask your decision about the house. A mere formality. But I thought I would just call as we went to grandmamma’s, and then I can settle everything for you to-morrow morning.”

“You are very kind, but——”

“Oh, perhaps you would rather see the

house yourself. Quite right. Of course you will take it?"

"I fear not."

Agatha, as well as Mrs. Thornycroft, was so utterly astonished, that neither of them could make any observation. To give up the house, and all her dear home-visions! She was aghast at the idea.

"Bless me, what does your husband mean? Mr. Harper, what possible objection——?"

"None, except that we have changed our plans. It is quite uncertain how long we may stay at Kingcombe Holm, or where we may go from thence."

"Not to America, surely? You would not break your word to poor dear Agatha?"

"I never break my word."

"Well, Mr. Harper, I declare I can't understand you," cried Emma, sharply.  
"I only hope that Agatha does. Is all this

with your knowledge and consent, my poor child?"

She said this, eyeing the husband with doubt and the wife with curiosity, as if disposed to put herself in the breach between the two, if breach there were.

Agatha heard Nathanael's quick breathing—caught her friend's look of patronising compassion. Something of the dignity of marriage, the shame lest any third party should share or even witness aught that passes between those two who have now become one—awoke in the young girl's spirit. The feeling was partly pride, yet mingled with something far holier.

She put Emma gently aside.

"Whatever my husband's decision may be, I am quite satisfied therewith."

Mrs. Thornycroft was mute with amazement. However, she was too good-natured

to be really angry. "Certainly, you are the most extraordinary, incomprehensible young couple! But I can't stay to discuss the matter. Agatha, I shall see you to-morrow?"

"Yes; I will bring her to you to-morrow," said Mr. Harper cheerfully, as their visitor departed.

The husband and wife regarded one another in silence. At last he said, taking her hand:

"I owe you thanks, Agatha, for——"

"For merely doing my duty. I hope I shall never forget that."

At the word "duty," so coldly uttered, Mr. Harper had let her hand fall. He stood motionless, leaning against the marble chimney-piece, his face as white as the marble itself, and, in Agatha's fancy, as hard.

"Have you, then, quite decided against our taking the house?" she asked at length.

"I find it will be impossible."

"Why so? But I forget; it is useless to ask *you* questions."—He made no reply.

"Pardon my inquiry, but do you still keep to your plan of leaving next week for Dorsetshire?"

"If you are willing."

"I, willing?" And she thought how, two hours before, she had rejoiced in the prospect of seeing her husband's ancestral home—her father-in-law—her new sisters. Her heart failed her—the poor girlish heart that as yet knew not either the world or itself. She burst into tears.

Instantly Mr. Harper caught her in his arms.

"Oh, Agatha, forgive me!—Have patience with me, and we may still be happy; at least, you may. Only trust your husband, and love him a little—a very little—as much as you can."

"How can I trust you, whom I do not thoroughly understand?—how can I—love——"

Her hesitation—her pride warring with the

expression of that feeling which her very anger taught her was there — seemed to pierce her husband to the soul.

“ I see,” he said mournfully. “ We are both punished, Agatha; I for the selfishness of my love towards you, and you — Alas! how can I make you happier, poor child?” Her tears fell still, but less with anger than emotion. “ I know now, we ought never to have been married. Yet since we are married——”

“ Ay, since we are married, let us try to be good to one another, and bear with one another, my husband!”

She kissed his hand, which held up her drooping head, and Nathanael pressed his lips on her forehead. So outward peace was made between them; but in sadness and in fear, like a compact sealed tremblingly over a half-closed grave.

END OF VOL. I.













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